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WARRIORS

HOLLYLEAF'S STORY



SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

WARRIORS

HOLLYLEAF'S STORY

ERIN HUNTER

HARPER

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Dedication

Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

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ALLEGIANCES

LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

THUNDERCLAN

FIRESTAR—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

LEAFPOOL—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

APPRENTICE, JAYFEATHER

(toms and she-cats without kits)

SQUIRRELFIGHT—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

DUSTPELT—dark brown tabby tom

SANDSTORM—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

BRACKENFUR—golden brown tabby tom

SORRELTAIL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

THORNCLAW—golden brown tabby tom

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

SPIDERLEG—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

GRAYSTRIPE—long-haired gray tom

BERRYNOSE—cream-colored tom

HAZELTAIL—small gray-and-white she-cat

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

HONEYFERN—light brown tabby she-cat

POPPYFROST—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICES

HOLLYLEAF—black she-cat with green eyes

(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

FOXPAW—reddish tabby tom

QUEENS

ICEPAW—white she-cat

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

FERNCLOUD—pale gray (with darker flecks) she-cat with green eyes

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace, mother of Spiderleg's kits: Rosekit (dark cream she-cat) and Toadkit (black-and-white tom)

MILLIE—striped gray tabby she-cat, former kittypet, mother of Graystripe's kits: Briarkit (dark brown she-cat), Bumblekit (very pale gray tom with black stripes), and Blossomkit (pale brown she-cat with a dark stripe along her spine)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes, mother of Birchfall's kits: Dovekit (gray she-cat) and Ivykit (white tabby she-cat)

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

LONGTAIL—pale tabby tom with dark black stripes, retired early due to failing sight

MOUSEFUR—small dusky brown she-cat

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

BLACKSTAR—large white tom with huge jet-black paws

DEPUTY

RUSSETFUR—dark ginger she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

LITTLECLOUD—very small tabby tom

APPRENTICE, FLAMEPAW (ginger tom)

WARRIORS

OAKFUR—small brown tom

APPRENTICE, TIGERPAW (dark brown tabby tom)

ROWANCLAW—ginger tom

SMOKEFOOT—black tom

APPRENTICE, OWLPAW (light brown tabby tom)

IVYTAIL—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat
APPRENTICE, DAWNPAW (cream-furred she-cat)
TOADFOOT—dark brown tom
CROWFROST—black-and-white tom
APPRENTICE, OLIVEPAW (tortoiseshell she-cat)
KINKFUR—tabby she-cat, with long fur that sticks out at all angles
RATSCAR—brown tom with long scar across his back
APPRENTICE, SHREWPAW (gray she-cat with black feet)
SNAKETAIL—dark brown tom with tabby-striped tail
APPRENTICE, SCORCHPAW (dark gray tom)
WHITEWATER—white she-cat with long fur, blind in one eye
APPRENTICE, REDPAW (mottled brown and ginger tom)
TAWNYPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
SNOWBIRD—pure-white she-cat
CEDARHEART—dark gray tom
TALLPOPPY—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

QUEENS ELDERS

LEADER DEPUTY MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

WINDCLAN

ONESTAR—brown tabby tom
ASHFOOT—gray she-cat
BARKFACE—short-tailed brown tom
APPRENTICE, KESTRELPAW (mottled gray tom)
TORNEAR—tabby tom
CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom
OWLWHISKER—light brown tabby tom
WHITETAIL—small white she-cat
NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat
GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white cat with blue eyes
WEASELFUR—ginger tom with white paws
HARESFRING—brown-and-white tom
LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with

amber eyes

APPRENTICE, THISTLEPAW (long-haired white tom)

DEWSPOTS—spotted gray tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, SEDGEPAW (light brown tabby she-cat)

WILLOWCLAW—gray she-cat

APPRENTICE, SWALLOWPAW (dark gray she-cat)

ANTPELT—brown tom with one black ear

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

APPRENTICE, SUNPAW (tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her forehead)

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

ELDERS

MORNINGFLOWER—very old tortoiseshell queen

WEBFOOT—dark gray tabby tom

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

LEOPARDSTAR—unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

DEPUTY

MISTYFOOT—gray she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

APPRENTICE, WILLOWSHINE (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

BLACKCLAW—smoky black tom

VOLETOOTH—small brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, MINNOWPAW (dark gray she-cat)

REEDWHISKER—black tom

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, PEBBLEPAW (mottled gray tom)

BEECHFUR—light brown tom

RIPPLETAIL—dark gray tabby tom

APPRENTICE, MALLOWPAW (light brown tabby tom)

QUEENS

ELDERS

GRAYMIST—pale gray tabby
DAWNFLOWER—pale gray she-cat
DAPPLENOSE—mottled gray she-cat
POUNCETAILE—ginger-and-white tom
MINTFUR—light gray tabby tom
APPRENTICE, NETTLEPAW (dark brown tabby tom)
OTTERHEART—dark brown she-cat
APPRENTICE, SNEEZEPAW (gray-and-white tom)
PINEFUR—very short-haired tabby she-cat
APPRENTICE, ROBINPAW (tortoiseshell-and-white tom)
RAINSTORM—mottled gray-blue tom
DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat
APPRENTICE, COPPERPAW (dark ginger she-cat)
ICEWING—white cat with blue eyes, mother of Beetlekit, Pricklekit, Petalkit, and Grasskit
HEAVYSTEP—thickset tabby tom
SWALLOWTAIL—dark tabby she-cat
STONESTREAM—gray tom

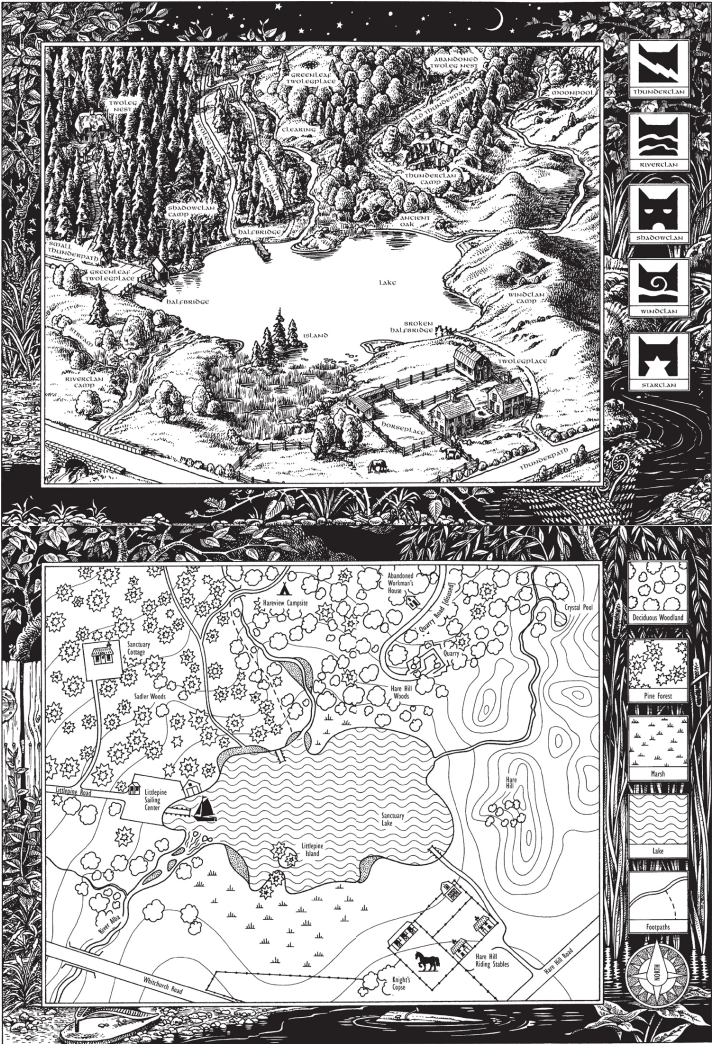
CATS OUTSIDE CLANS

SOL—white-and-brown tabby long-haired tom with pale yellow eyes
SMOKY—muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace
FLOSS—small gray-and-white she-cat who lives at the horseplace
PURDY—elderly, plump tabby loner with a gray muzzle
JINGO—dark brown tabby she-cat
HUSSAR—broad-shouldered gray tom
SPECKLE—flecked brown she-cat, nursing four kits
FRITZ—black-and-white tom with a torn ear
POD—scrawny brown tom with a gray muzzle
JET—long-haired black tom
MERRY—ginger-and-white she-cat
CHIRP—pale gray tabby tom

OTHER ANIMALS

MIDNIGHT—a star-gazing badger who
lives by the sea

Maps





CHAPTER 1

Thunder crashed, louder than anything Hollyleaf had heard before. There was a ripple overhead and a strange cracking sound. The sky is falling! And then it was all around her, sharper and harder than Hollyleaf expected, throwing her to the ground and crushing her bones. I can't breathe! She struggled frantically, feeling her claws rip, but the sky was too heavy, too cold, and she let the endless dark sweep her away.

Hollyleaf was standing on the edge of a cliff. Behind her, the hollow yawned like a hungry mouth. Flames, hissing and orange, filled the air with smoke and bitter ash. Hollyleaf's littermates, Lionblaze and Jayfeather, crouched beside her; she could feel them trembling against her fur. In front of them, Ashfur stood at the end of a branch that would lead them through the fire. Squirrelflight stood next to him, fury blazing in her eyes. Hollyleaf stared at her mother, waiting for her to move Ashfur out of the way.

"Enough, Ashfur," Squirrelflight hissed. "Your quarrel is with me. These young cats have done nothing to hurt you. Do what you like with me, but let them out of the fire."

Ashfur looked at her in surprise. "You don't understand. This is the only way to make you feel the same pain that you caused me. You tore my heart out when you chose Brambleclaw over me. Anything I did to you would never hurt as much. But your kits... If you watch them die, then you'll know the pain I felt."

Squirrelflight met his gaze. "Kill them, then. You won't hurt me that way." She took a step away from him, then looked back over her shoulder. "If you really want to hurt me, you'll have to find a better way than that. They are not my kits."

The ground lurched beneath Hollyleaf's paws. Squirrelflight is not my mother? Hollyleaf was Clanless, codeless. She could be a rogue, even a

kittypet. There was no way Hollyleaf could let Ashfur tell the four Clans about Squirrelflight's confession. She and her littermates would be driven out! Everything they had done up till now, all their loyalty to the warrior code, would count for nothing.

The silence was deafening, pressing more heavily on Hollyleaf's ears than the stones that pinned her to the cold floor. Dust filled her mouth and nose, and pain stabbed through one of her legs. *I've been buried alive!* Hollyleaf thrashed and bucked against the weight of the rocks. Her head broke free with a shower of small stones. There wasn't a sliver of light from the mouth of the tunnel. She was trapped in the dark.

"Help! Help me! I'm stuck!"

She stopped. Who was she calling to? She had no Clanmates now. She had left that life behind—on the other side of the rocks, as far away as if it were the moon. Her brothers and Leafpool knew that she had killed Ashfur. And now Jayfeather and Lionblaze probably thought she had died in the rockfall. *Maybe it's better that way. At least they won't come looking for me.* Hollyleaf closed her eyes again.

Hollyleaf had followed Ashfur to the WindClan border. She had stalked him like she would a piece of prey, treading softly, claws sheathed to keep them from catching in brambles or scratching on stone. When he reached the bank of the stream, with the water foaming far below, Hollyleaf sprang on him, twisted his head to one side, sank her teeth into his fur and skin, telling herself over and over: This is the only way! Ashfur dropped to his belly and Hollyleaf jumped back as he rolled into the stream. She washed the blood from her paws, letting the cold water chill her legs, her flanks, all the way to her heart. I did it for my Clan!

Hollyleaf forced the images from her mind with a shudder. Taking a deep breath, she wriggled her front paws free and pushed away the stones that were pressing against her chest. Then she reached out as far as she could and started to haul herself out. She hissed when one of her hind legs moved. It was so painful, her leg felt as if it might be broken. Hollyleaf pictured the well-stocked medicine den, with comfrey to mend the bone and poppy seeds to help her sleep through the worst of the discomfort. *As far away as the moon*, she reminded herself. Gritting her teeth, she dragged the rest of her body out of the stones. Her wounded leg bounced agonizingly onto the floor.

"Great StarClan, that hurts!" Hollyleaf growled. Speaking aloud seemed to help, so she carried on. "I've been down here before. I know there are other ways out. I just need to follow this tunnel until I find a source of light. Come on, one paw in front of the other." In spite of her fear, in spite of the pain in her leg, the memories kept flooding back....

"I am your mother, Hollyleaf," Leafpool had whispered. Hollyleaf shook her head. That was impossible. How could she be the daughter of a medicine cat, when medicine cats were forbidden to have kits? Worse than being a rogue or a kittypet, her own birth had broken the code of the Clans.

Hollyleaf unsheathed her claws to give her a better grip on the stone. To her dismay, several of them had already broken off in her struggle to get out, and the tips of her pads felt wet and sticky. She smelled blood and pictured the trail she was leaving as she crawled along the tunnel. If Lionblaze and Jayfeather dug through the rockfall, they'd know she'd survived and would follow the trail to find her. Suddenly her front paws thudded into stone. She yelped with pain and swiveled sideways to follow the curve of the wall. It was so dark, she couldn't even tell if her eyes were open. *If I can just find some light. If, if, if...*

Jayfeather had figured out who their father was. "It's Crowfeather."

Hollyleaf stared at him in disbelief. "But... Crowfeather's from WindClan! I'm a ThunderClan cat!"

"Yellowfang came to me in a dream," Jayfeather insisted. "She told me it was time we knew the truth."

For Hollyleaf, there was nothing left. Half-Clan? She stood in the mouth of the tunnel and felt the scent of stone smooth her ruffled fur. She could disappear down here and emerge somewhere far from the Clans. She could begin a new life, away from all these lies and broken promises.

Hollyleaf turned and ran into the tunnel. She heard Jayfeather calling to her—and then the thunder came, and the sky fell in, and she was swallowed up by the dizzying black.

Hollyleaf kept going. *Breathe, scrape, haul.* Over and over. She longed to stop, to sleep, to wait for a StarClan warrior to come for her. But did StarClan even know she was here? Her birth had broken the warrior code. She had killed another cat. And she had given up her place in ThunderClan. No ancestors would be watching over her. Had they been watching when Hollyleaf spilled all her Clan's secrets at the Gathering?

"Wait!" Hollyleaf leaped to her paws. "There's something that I have to say that all the Clans should hear." There had been too many lies, too much damage done to the warrior code, for her to keep quiet any longer.

The clearing was so quiet that Hollyleaf could hear a mouse scuttering among the dead leaves under the Great Oak. "You think you know me," she began. "And my brothers, Lionblaze and Jayfeather of ThunderClan. You think you know us, but everything you have been told about us is a lie! We are not the kits of Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight."

"What?" Brambleclaw shot to his paws from where he sat with the other

deputies among the roots of the Great Oak. "Squirrelflight, why is she talking such nonsense?"

"I'm sorry, Brambleclaw, but it's true. I'm not their mother, and you are not their father."

The Clan deputy stared at her. "Then who is?"

Squirrelflight turned her sad green gaze on the cat she had always claimed as her daughter. "Tell them, Hollyleaf. I kept the secret for seasons; I'm not going to reveal it now."

"Coward!" Hollyleaf flashed at her. Her gaze swept around the clearing, seeing the eyes of every single cat trained on her. "I'm not afraid of the truth! Leafpool is our mother, and Crowfeather—yes, Crowfeather of WindClan—is our father."

Yowls of shock greeted her words, but Hollyleaf shouted over them. "These cats were so ashamed of us that they gave us away and lied to every single one of you to hide the fact that they had broken the warrior code. It's all her fault." She whipped her tail around to point at Leafpool. "How can the Clans survive when there are cowards and liars at the very heart of them?"

Her words seemed to echo from the walls of the tunnel. Hollyleaf wished she could go back to the start of the Gathering, take back the terrible truth she had spilled, spare her Clanmates the pain and shock she had seen in their faces. *What have I done?*

The constant dark was making her eyes ache. She had been searching for a chink of light for so long that she imagined one had appeared up ahead. The faintest line of something paler than black, like the first hint of milky dawn above the trees. Hollyleaf blinked and shook her head, trying to clear her vision. But the gray stripe was still there. Maybe it *was* light? She limped faster, ignoring the burn in her hind leg. The light grew stronger. It was seeping from a gap in the wall: another, smaller tunnel leading off. Hollyleaf dragged herself around the corner. Was it her imagination, or could she see the walls of a cave opening out ahead? In her excitement, she tried to stand up. Her hind leg buckled beneath her and stars exploded in her head. The last thing she saw was the stone floor rushing up to meet her.



CHAPTER 2

Leafpool! Leafpool, I'm thirsty! Hollyleaf was burning up. Her throat felt parched and her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. She must be in the medicine den with a fever. Where was the soaked moss that Leafpool always left close to her patients? She twisted her head, and her muzzle bumped into something soft and wet and green-smelling. Hollyleaf sucked at the tendrils of moss, trying not to wince as she swallowed the precious water. Nothing had ever tasted better.

Suddenly she realized she wasn't alone. There was a cat bending over her, pushing something beneath her injured leg. Hollyleaf hissed in pain, and the cat apologized softly. "It's just some feathers, to make you more comfortable. Lie still now."

Hollyleaf stiffened. She didn't recognize this cat's voice or scent. "Who are you? Where am I?" She started to flail her front paws. "Let me go!"

A small, cool foot was placed on her shoulder, gently pushing her back down. Strong-smelling leaves were moved close to her muzzle. "Hush, it's all right. You're safe. Eat these, then go back to sleep."

Hollyleaf allowed herself to be nudged back onto the floor. She swallowed the herbs—comfrey, from the scent of it—and two tiny poppy seeds. The feathers felt soft and warm against her wounded leg. With a small sigh, Hollyleaf closed her eyes and sleep dragged her away once more.

When she woke next, her head felt clearer and the pain in her leg had dulled to a nagging ache. Hollyleaf lay still for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the near-darkness. This definitely wasn't the ThunderClan medicine den. She was lying on a thin bed of feathers over cold stone. *I'm still in the tunnels!* Hollyleaf felt a jolt of relief, then

alarm. Who was down here with her? Hollyleaf tried to recall the scent of the cat who had told her to go back to sleep, but her belly rumbled and suddenly all she could think about was how hungry she was. When had she last eaten? She tried to stand up but her hind leg crumpled and she flopped onto her side, frustrated.

"You're awake!" A face loomed from the shadows. "How is your leg?"

Hollyleaf opened her eyes wide until she could make out ginger-and-white patches on the cat's pelt. He smelled of stone and water and moss. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice hoarse from lack of use.

The cat ignored her. Instead, he pushed something toward her with one paw. "You must be starving. Here, eat."

Fresh-kill! Hollyleaf bent her head, ready to dive in, then pulled back. A small, slimy minnow lay in front of her. "I don't like fish," she mewed.

The cat twitched his ears. "Down here, you don't always have a choice." His tone was mild, but Hollyleaf felt embarrassed. Her belly let out a loud growl as if it would be happy with anything, even crow-food. Holding her breath, Hollyleaf bit into the fish. *Plump, tasty mouse*, she told herself. *Pine-scented squirrel. The first pigeon of newleaf.*

She swallowed the last mouthful and drank from the moss beside her. The ginger-and-white cat watched her expectantly. "Thank you," Hollyleaf meowed. "I... I guess it didn't taste too bad."

The tom was still studying her. "You're Hollypaw, aren't you?"

She blinked. "Hollyleaf, actually. How did you know? I've never seen you before, have I?"

The cat shook his head and his eyes clouded. "No, you've never seen me. But I saw you with your littermates when you came to rescue those kits, just before the river flooded."

Hollyleaf stared at him. She would never forget the desperate search for the lost WindClan kits with Jayfeather and Lionblaze. They had been washed out of the tunnels and into the lake when the underground river overflowed. It had been a lucky escape for all of them. Now this cat was telling her that he had been here! "Who *are* you?" she mewed.

The ginger-and-white tom busied himself with the feathers underneath her injured leg, rearranging them so that they were spread evenly. "My name is Fallen Leaves," he meowed quietly.

"You're not from the Clans, are you?" Hollyleaf pressed. "Where do you live?"

Fallen Leaves padded over to a small bundle of herbs and started dividing them up. "Once I lived in the hills above the lake, but this is my home now." He turned, pushing some herbs toward Hollyleaf. "Eat this comfrey; it'll help your leg. I won't give you any more poppy seeds unless you have trouble sleeping."

Hollyleaf obediently chewed the fragrant leaves. "Were you a

medicine cat?" she asked.

Fallen Leaves tipped his head to one side. "I don't know what that is. We all learned about herbs and injuries so we could help one another. Is that what you mean?"

"Kind of." Hollyleaf propped herself up on her front legs, feeling her heart beat faster. "Who were the other cats? Were you part of a Clan?" Was there another group of cats living near here, one that the Clans didn't know about?

"No more questions," Fallen Leaves ordered. "You need to rest. You haven't broken your leg, just wrenched it. You'll mend soon enough, and then I suppose you'll want to go back to your friends."

"No!" Hollyleaf yelped. "I can't go back! Not ever!"

Fallen Leaves just shrugged. "That's up to you. Lie down and stop wriggling. I'll bring you something to eat later." He picked up the scraps of fish bones and walked away.

Hollyleaf stared after him until the shadows swallowed him up. The walls of the tunnel seemed paler, as if more light was filtering in. When she'd been speaking, she'd heard her voice echoing from far away, which suggested that her first impression had been right and she was lying at the entrance to a cave. She couldn't hear any water, so it wasn't the cave with the river. Hollyleaf rested her chin on her paws and closed her eyes. She was lost and injured, but somehow a cat had found her and kept her alive with food and water, and herbs for her leg. Had he been sent by StarClan? Or was she just very, very lucky? Either way, she figured that she was safe, at least for now.

She woke from a doze to find another little fish beside her, as well as freshly soaked moss and some more comfrey. It was harder to see the walls of the cave, which meant it must have gotten darker outside. Was it night? Hollyleaf wondered how many days she had been down here. It had been a full moon when she... left. Perhaps Fallen Leaves could tell her what the moon was now. After eating her fish and masking the taste with the comfrey, Hollyleaf tried to stay awake, hoping that Fallen Leaves would come back. The cave grew darker until she couldn't see a thing. Hollyleaf gave up waiting for her strange companion. He would come again in the morning, she was sure.

This time she was awake and half-sitting up to wash her chest when Fallen Leaves arrived. He was carrying something bulkier and fluffier-looking than a fish. Hollyleaf paused between licks. "Hey! You caught a mouse!"

Fallen Leaves deposited the fresh-kill at her paws. He looked flushed with triumph. "I heard it creeping into one of the tunnels," he explained. "I hoped you'd like it."

"I do!" Hollyleaf meowed. "Thanks!" She leaned forward to take a bite, then looked up. "There's plenty here. Would you like some?"

Fallen Leaves shook his head. "No, it's all yours." While Hollyleaf continued eating, he gently prodded her injured leg. "Is it mending, do you think?"

Hollyleaf nodded with her mouth full. "Definitely," she mumbled. "I can bend it now, and it doesn't hurt so much when I move."

"You can try walking on it when you've finished eating," Fallen Leaves decided. "Not too far, but you need to start exercising it before the muscles waste away."

Hollyleaf twitched her ears with surprise. Fallen Leaves sounded just like a medicine cat. He *must* have come from a Clan! Or something very close to a Clan—like the Tribe of Rushing Water. She swallowed and mewed, "Are you a Tribe cat? Did you come from the mountains?"

Fallen Leaves stared blankly at her. "This is my home now," he replied. "There is nowhere else."

Hollyleaf shivered as if a cold claw had run down her spine. There was something about Fallen Leaves's voice that made her feel more alone and desperate than she could imagine. She straightened up and nudged away the scraps of mouse ears and tail. "Where should I walk?" she asked.

"Don't get too excited," Fallen Leaves warned. "Just a few steps today, that's all."

Hollyleaf used her front legs to push herself to her paws. A stab of pain ran up her injured leg, but she took a deep breath and kept her paw on the ground. Hesitantly, she took one step forward. Her hind leg held, though it felt weak and not quite connected to the rest of her. Hollyleaf limped toward the place where the light grew stronger. The walls of the tunnel opened out on either side into a small cave, about six fox-lengths wide. A tiny hole in the roof blazed with light, so bright that Hollyleaf had to screw up her eyes to look at it. "The sun is shining today," Fallen Leaves commented as he came to stand by her shoulder.

Hollyleaf turned to face him. "Do you ever go outside? How can you live here all the time?"

Fallen Leaves looked away. "This is my home," he repeated. "Now, can you make it back to your nest?"

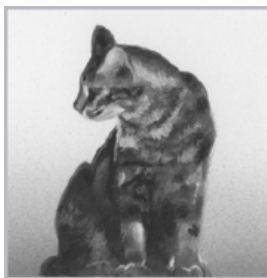
Hollyleaf started to walk back along the tunnel, frustrated that she hadn't gone farther. But by the time she reached the dented pile of feathers her leg was aching badly, and she sank down with relief. "You can try again tomorrow," Fallen Leaves meowed as if he could tell she was in pain. "Rest now."

He turned to leave but Hollyleaf reached out with one paw. "Wait! I'm bored of being on my own. Can't you stay and talk to me?"

Fallen Leaves viewed her with somber blue eyes. "Rest," he mewed. "That way your leg will heal faster. I'll see you again later."

He padded away and Hollyleaf slumped down on the feathers. She willed her leg to get better soon. She'd wanted to escape from ThunderClan, but a life in the dark, dependent on another cat for food

and water, was not what she had imagined.



CHAPTER 3

The slim beam of sunlight felt warm on her fur as Hollyleaf marched across the cave and back again on all four paws. "See?" she challenged Fallen Leaves, who was sitting at the entrance. "Good as new!"

It felt like whole seasons had passed before Hollyleaf had been able to walk all the way across the cave without limping, but Fallen Leaves assured her the moon wasn't full again yet. He had insisted that she stay within the cave to exercise, walking in circles until she felt dizzy. He still left her on her own for most of the day and all night, but Hollyleaf didn't want to start roaming the caves without him. She had been lucky once; she couldn't rely on Fallen Leaves finding her again.

Fallen Leaves came over and sniffed her leg. "If you're telling the truth about not being in pain, then it must have healed."

"Of course I'm telling the truth!" Hollyleaf protested. How dare he suggest she was lying? The truth was the only thing that mattered, ever. *But it didn't feel like that when I spilled my Clan's secrets at the Gathering.*

Hollyleaf pushed the image of Squirrelflight's horrified face out of her mind. "Can we explore now?" she asked.

Fallen Leaves traced a line in the stone dust with his paw. "You mean, you want me to show you the way out."

"No!" Hollyleaf exclaimed. "I want you to show me around your home. Where is the cave with the river? How far do the tunnels reach?"

The ginger-and-white cat looked at her in surprise. "You really want to know? Most cats want to get straight out of here."

There was such pain in his eyes that Hollyleaf felt a rush of sympathy. "I have nowhere else to go," she mewed softly. "You've been a good friend to me, Fallen Leaves. Why would I want to leave you now?"

Fallen Leaves led Hollyleaf down a narrow tunnel on the far side of the cave, into darkness so thick that it seemed to lap at Hollyleaf's fur like water. The floor felt smooth and cold under her paws, and she was only aware of the walls on either side when the tips of her whiskers brushed against them. At first she reacted too much and lurched into the opposite wall with a crash, but soon she learned to move her head just the tiniest amount when her whiskers tingled.

"The tunnel opens out down here," Fallen Leaves called back over his shoulder. He must have heard her stumbling from side to side.

Hollyleaf realized she could see her companion's outline against a paler shade of gray. The sound of water echoed down the tunnel, not exactly splashing but a soft liquid murmur that could only be the underground river. Hollyleaf broke into a trot, squeezing past Fallen Leaves and bursting into the huge cavern. It was filled with dusky light and to Hollyleaf, after being trapped in the dark for so long, it seemed as familiar and welcoming as her den in the hollow. In front of her was the river, tame and quiet between its shallow stone banks, and there was the ledge high up on the wall where Lionblaze had boasted of standing.

"Your brother and the she-cat played up there," Fallen Leaves remarked, coming to stand alongside her.

He means Lionblaze and Heathertail. Hollyleaf felt a stir of discomfort. Was Fallen Leaves's impression of the Clans based on cats hiding out of sight and breaking the warrior code? To change the subject, she nodded toward a tunnel on the far side of the river. "That leads to outside, doesn't it?" It was strange to think that a short walk would take her back into the heart of ThunderClan.

"It used to," Fallen Leaves meowed, "but it's blocked by mud now. Do you remember that tunnel over there? That's where you found the kits."

Hollyleaf looked at the yawning black mouth, close to the edge of the river. She shivered as she recalled the desperate search for the lost WindClan cats, while far above them Onestar and Firestar prepared to wage war over their disappearance.

"The tunnels aren't scary once you get used to them," Fallen Leaves reassured her. "I'll show you, but first you should eat." He padded to the edge of the river and paused for a moment, his gaze fixed on the black water sliding past. Suddenly one of his front paws shot out and scooped a trembling silver fish onto the rock. It flapped madly until Fallen Leaves killed it with a single strike. "Here," he meowed, pushing it toward Hollyleaf.

"Er, don't you want to eat, too?" Hollyleaf suggested, hanging back from yet another fishy meal. If she'd been born in RiverClan, she would have chosen to starve by now!

Fallen Leaves shook his head. "No, this one's for you. Eat it up; then we can explore."

Grudgingly, Hollyleaf gulped down the fish. It didn't taste too bad this time, and when she drank from the river, the cool, sharp tang of the water was refreshing. Fallen Leaves was waiting for her at the mouth of the darkest tunnel. He beckoned to her with his tail before trotting into the shadows. Hollyleaf followed more slowly, taking one last glance back at the half-lit cave before surrendering to the blackness.

She could hear paw steps ahead, ringing confidently on the stone. "It'll get lighter soon," Fallen Leaves called back to her. Hollyleaf broke into a trot, glad to get some warmth into her bones. Suddenly her nose brushed something soft, and she slowed down to avoid crashing into Fallen Leaves's haunches. She sniffed, trying to get a fix on his scent, but all she could smell was cold, damp stone. Had Fallen Leaves been in the tunnels for so long that he'd taken on the scent of his surroundings?

Fallen Leaves put on a burst of speed and Hollyleaf ran to keep up with him. The walls of the tunnel emerged from the shadows and she could see the outline of the cat in front of her. Hollyleaf couldn't tell where the light was coming from, and for once she didn't instantly look down to check where she was putting her paws. She knew the floor was smooth and level here—no loose pebbles had tripped her up so far, and there hadn't been any sharp inclines.

Fallen Leaves turned to look at her, his eyes gleaming in the semidarkness. "Okay to go a bit faster?" he meowed. There was a hint of challenge in his voice.

"Of course!" Hollyleaf replied. Her injured leg wasn't aching in the slightest, and she was ready to use muscles that had been kept still for too long.

She hardly had time to take a breath before Fallen Leaves raced away. His ginger-and-white pelt was almost instantly swallowed up by the shadows beyond the reach of the pale light. This time Hollyleaf didn't think twice about following him. Her whiskers quivered with the effort of feeling for the walls on either side, and she kept her weight low over her paws so that she could adjust to changes in the floor of the tunnel. It started to slope down steeply, so Hollyleaf rocked backward until her front paws were doing little more than feeling the way, keeping her balanced on her haunches. After a while her hind leg began to hurt, but then the tunnel flattened out and Hollyleaf was able to run at full-pelt again. She could hear Fallen Leaves ahead of her, and she was starting to know when the tunnel curved or hit an incline from the sound of his paws.

When they burst into a small cave that was filled with sunlight from a crack in the roof, Hollyleaf was almost disappointed. The cats stopped for a moment, panting.

"That was fun!" Hollyleaf gasped.

"You're doing really well!" Fallen Leaves purred admiringly.

"Thanks!" Hollyleaf looked around. "Where are we? I mean, in relation to outside?"

"We've come to the other side of the hills," Fallen Leaves explained. "That tunnel over there"—he nodded to a gap in the wall—"leads out if you follow the scent of trees when you reach the fork."

Hollyleaf tipped back her head and stared at the ceiling. Pointed stone blades hung down, ringed with delicate lines. A drip of water clung to each tip. She didn't know the territory above them, not if it was beyond Clan boundaries. But it was weird to think that caves like this, and long winding tunnels, had been beneath her paws all the time.

"We should head back," Fallen Leaves meowed. "You don't want to hurt your leg. Come on, let's go a different way."

Before Hollyleaf could protest that her leg was fine, he darted into a side tunnel. "Wait for me!" Hollyleaf squeaked playfully. She raced into the darkness, stretching her neck until her muzzle bumped against cold fur. "Caught you!" she teased.

Fallen Leaves chirped with amusement. "We'll see about that!" He lengthened his stride and pulled ahead.

Hollyleaf leaped forward, but her toe caught on a loose stone and she stumbled. Regaining her balance, she stopped to listen. Fallen Leaves's paws sounded faintly somewhere down the tunnel. Hollyleaf set off, but almost at once she crashed into the wall because she was so busy straining her ears for footsteps. She paused and shook her head. *Focus!* She straightened her whiskers with a flick of her paw and started trotting down the tunnel. She could definitely hear Fallen Leaves ahead of her. A breeze on her face revealed a tunnel leading off to one side. Hollyleaf instinctively turned her head to look but it was so dark she couldn't see any change in the shadows around her. She fought down a pulse of alarm and sniffed the empty space where the side tunnel began. There was no trace of warmth or fur, no sign that Fallen Leaves had gone this way. Had he kept to the main tunnel, then? Hollyleaf pricked her ears. The silence pressed around her, heavy as water filling her ears. She forced herself to walk forward, and jumped as she heard the faintest sound of paw steps. She stopped, straining to listen. The footsteps had stopped. Hollyleaf looked down at her paws, even though she couldn't see them. *Mouse-brain!* She'd been listening to the echo of her own steps. She was completely alone in the darkness.

A wail rose in her throat and she swallowed to keep it down. Her pelt stood on end and she felt her paws start to tremble. Surely Fallen Leaves would notice she wasn't behind him? Or would he assume she'd found a different way back? She'd been running so confidently after him. Hollyleaf took a step forward and her head thudded against rock. Reeling, she jumped sideways and hit her shoulder against the opposite wall. Had the tunnel shrunk? Were the walls closing in on her, slowly crushing her to nothing?

"Hollyleaf!" A whisper beside her made Hollyleaf almost jump out of her skin. "Are you okay?" Fallen Leaves asked, coming closer until his muzzle touched her ears. "What happened?"

“I didn’t know where you were!” Hollyleaf burst out. “It was so dark, and I thought I could hear you but it was only my own paw steps! Then I hit the walls and I thought you’d lost me!”

“I’ll never do that, I promise,” Fallen Leaves murmured into her ear. “You will never be lost down here, because you have me. Come on, I’ll take you back.”

With his head close to hers, he led Hollyleaf along the tunnel, slowing his pace as she limped beside him. They emerged into the cavern, waded through the river, and headed back into the tunnel where Hollyleaf’s nest lay. She collapsed into the feathers, feeling grateful for their warmth against her chilled fur. Her leg throbbed and Fallen Leaves pushed some poppy seeds toward her.

“Eat these—they’ll help you sleep,” he prompted. He turned to leave but Hollyleaf lifted her head.

“Can... can you stay here tonight?” she mewed. “I don’t want to be alone in the dark again. There’s room in my nest if I shift over.”

Fallen Leaves hesitated, then stepped into the circle of feathers. “Okay, just for one night,” he meowed. He curled next to her somewhat awkwardly, and Hollyleaf wriggled to give him more room. The poppy seeds were working and her eyelids felt heavy. She uncurled until her spine was pressed against Fallen Leaves’s flank. For a moment it was like being back in the hollow, sharing her nest with Cinderheart. Hollyleaf breathed deeply and started to drift into sleep. But just before the limpid blackness filled her mind, she flinched. *Why am I so cold?* There was no warmth coming from Fallen Leaves’s pelt at all. Had living underground chilled him right to the bone?



CHAPTER 4

“Hey! Wake up! It’s time for the morning patrol!”

Hollyleaf rolled over and rubbed a paw over her eyes. Fallen Leaves was looking down at her, his tail curled high over his back.

“Come on, sleepy slug!” he teased.

Hollyleaf scrambled up. She had been dreaming that she was back in ThunderClan, chasing a squirrel that got tinier and tinier the closer she came. Just as she reached out to grab it, the squirrel had vanished completely.

She peered past Fallen Leaves to look at the pale yellow light slanting into the tunnel. The angle between the beam of light and the roof was narrower today, which meant the sun was lower in the sky. Hollyleaf tipped her head to one side. She’d been here... how many moons? Three or four, at least. Leaf-fall must be creeping into the woods outside, turning the trees gold and scarlet. Hollyleaf wondered if it would get colder in the tunnels. She prodded her nest with her foot. She’d need to find more feathers.

Fallen Leaves was trotting away from her. “I’ll take the moor-tunnel today,” he called over his shoulder. “And you can check the woods-tunnel.”

He had come up with names for the two main exit tunnels that didn’t lead back into ThunderClan territory. They never went into those tunnels; without saying anything out loud, Hollyleaf knew that Fallen Leaves was trying to keep her distracted from her former home. She had chosen to stay with him, so that must be what she wanted, right? When she had told him about daily life in the Clans, with border and hunting patrols and ceremonies for apprentices and warriors, he had suggested doing the same down here. Now each day started with a patrol of the exit tunnels—not that they ever found anything in the empty stone

pathways—followed by fishing in the underground river. Hollyleaf had learned to hook minnows with her paw almost as smoothly as Fallen Leaves, and she had grown used to the strong, watery taste. She could run through the dark confidently now, detecting the faintest breezes on her whiskers and picking up the tiniest echoes of flowing water from the river to locate where she was. When she was patrolling an exit tunnel, she only went as far as the light that spilled in from the mouth, hanging back as if it would burn her paws. She belonged in the shadows now, hiding from daylight and the sound of the wind in the trees.

Hollyleaf shivered. She had shelter, food, and company. Wasn't that more than she deserved, after what she had done? Fallen Leaves was much less demanding than her old Clanmates; he let her eat all the fish they caught together, and he never spent so long with her that she grew tired of his company. In fact, he often left her alone, especially at night. Hollyleaf wondered where he slept; she thought she'd explored all the tunnels by now, but she'd never seen signs of another nest.

"Come on!" Fallen Leaves's voice echoed down the tunnel, and Hollyleaf broke into a run. She caught up with him in the river-cave and they stood side by side, looking down at the water. It was flowing more quickly today, and little waves spilled over the edges of the stone gully.

"It rained last night," Fallen Leaves explained.

Hollyleaf felt a flash of alarm. "Is the river going to flood?"

Fallen Leaves shook his head. "Not yet." He walked over to a corner and came back rolling a large flat stone with his muzzle. He nudged it to the edge of the wet line left by splashing waves. "We'll use this as a marker to see if the river rises any more."

Hollyleaf ran her paw over the stone. It felt smooth, like an egg. "That's a good idea," she commented.

"It's what the sharpclaws told me to do," Fallen Leaves meowed. "Before I came down here for my initiation."

Hollyleaf looked up at him sharply. Fallen Leaves had mentioned once before that he had gotten lost in the tunnels while training to be a sharpclaw, which seemed to be the same as a Clan warrior. He wouldn't tell her anything else about his Clan, or Tribe, or whatever his kin had called themselves.

"If you went back now," she mewed gently, "you'd be one of the greatest sharpclaws ever. You may have gotten lost once, but you know these tunnels better than any cat! If finding your way through the tunnels is supposed to teach you to be strong, brave, and independent, you are all of those things! You'd be a hero!"

Fallen Leaves stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Go back?" he hissed. "I can't go back! Don't you understand? It's too late!" Shaking with distress, he whirled around and raced into the tunnel that led to WindClan, the one they called the moor-tunnel.

"Wait!" Hollyleaf called, running after him. But she stopped when

she reached the edge of the river-cave. All she had were questions for Fallen Leaves, and she didn't want to make him more upset. The thought flashed in her mind that she might not be the only one fleeing from a terrible secret. She had never told Fallen Leaves what had happened with Ashfur; perhaps she had more in common with her new companion than she realized.

She turned and padded back across the cave. The entrance to the woods-tunnel was on the far side of the river, and today it took a much bigger leap to clear the gully. Hollyleaf yelped as her hind paws splashed into the edge of the water and showered her belly fur with icy droplets. As she entered the tunnel she broke into a run to warm herself up.

The rough gray walls on each side emerged from the darkness as she neared the entrance. The wind was blowing directly into the tunnel, filling Hollyleaf's mouth with scents of drying leaves and brittle grass. She padded closer until the light spilled over her paws. She lifted up one and looked at her pad in surprise. It was pale and tough from moons of running on stone. Suddenly Hollyleaf longed to feel soft, green grass under her feet, and to see the sky, vast and full of light, above her. She felt herself pulled toward the mouth of the tunnel as if she were a twig on a river. *Outside!*

The light grew stronger and Hollyleaf screwed up her eyes. It wasn't sunshine—this light was cool and gray—but it was brighter than anything she'd seen in a long while. The entrance to the tunnel was a circle of dazzling white, too painful to look at directly. Suddenly there was a crashing noise beyond the brightness, the sound of branches cracking beneath heavy paws. Then a volley of barking, mixed with a high-pitched yipping. Hollyleaf winced as the noise hit her ears; she was used to the heavy silence of the tunnels. She shrank back against the wall, too startled to know which way to run. There was an explosion of paw steps at the entrance and a huge dark shape burst through the light. At the same time a wave of stench hit Hollyleaf's nose. *Fox!*

Fear rooted her paws to the ground. The intruder crashed into her, bounced off the opposite wall, then turned and stared back the way it had come, taking no notice of Hollyleaf cowering in the corner. A head was thrust through the circle of light at the mouth of the tunnel. A long pink tongue hung from dripping jaws, and huge ears flopped down on either side of mean yellow eyes. The fox let out a yelp and scrabbled backward, squashing Hollyleaf against the wall of the tunnel. She held her breath, dizzy with terror. The dog at the entrance growled and took a step toward them. It blocked out the light so that its features vanished and all Hollyleaf could see was the faint outline of its massive shoulders. The fox crouched down, filling Hollyleaf's nose with soft, tickly fur. She longed to sneeze but couldn't risk being discovered.

There was a shout from outside—a deep Twoleg voice, raised in

anger—and the dog's ears twitched. A moment later it jerked backward, and Hollyleaf squinted into the glare to see the Twoleg holding the dog's collar with one fat, pink paw. The dog whined as it was dragged away. The fox relaxed, giving Hollyleaf just enough room to slide gently back. It was only a cub, no taller than she was, and its fur smelled of milk and earth from its den.

Suddenly Hollyleaf heard a fierce whisper. "What's happening? Are you all right?" Fallen Leaves was standing just around the curve in the tunnel. She ran toward him. His eyes gleamed like moons in the half light.

"Look out!" Hollyleaf hissed. "There's a fox behind me! Run!"



CHAPTER 5

Hollyleaf tucked her nose under her tail and tried to shut out the noise that drifted down the tunnels to her nest. The fox cub was still somewhere underground, whimpering in the dark. Why hadn't it left? Was it afraid that the dog was waiting for it? Hollyleaf sniffed and wriggled deeper into the feathers. The high-pitched whine broke through, niggling her like thorns.

Hollyleaf sat up. *For StarClan's sake, shut up!* There was no way she could sleep through this noise. She hopped out of her nest and padded along the tunnel to the river-cave. It was filled with a pale gray wash of starlight. Fallen Leaves was sitting at the edge of the water.

"Can you hear the fox?" Hollyleaf asked irritably.

Fallen Leaves shrugged. "It'll find its way out eventually."

"But it's keeping me awake!" Hollyleaf complained. *Doesn't Fallen Leaves need to sleep too?*

The fox let out a loud yelp, as if it could hear them talking. Hollyleaf felt a rush of pity. She knew what it felt like to be lost and frightened in the dark. "Maybe I should go find it," she murmured.

Fallen Leaves stared at her in surprise. "But it's a fox!"

"It's a baby," she countered. "You wouldn't leave a kit down here, would you?"

"A kit wouldn't try to eat me," Fallen Leaves pointed out.

"I'm too much of a mouthful for this cub," Hollyleaf assured him, hoping that was true. The fox had smelled strongly of milk, which meant it probably wasn't eating fresh-kill yet. And it certainly hadn't noticed it was sitting on top of prey when the dog chased it into the hole. She shook out her fur and started toward the woods-tunnel.

"You're not really going to look for it, are you?" Fallen Leaves sounded astonished.

“Yes, if it means I can get some sleep,” meowed Hollyleaf. “If I’m not back by dawn, come and fetch me, okay?” she added, only half-joking.

“Of course,” Fallen Leaves replied somberly.

The darkness felt even more solid than usual, and Hollyleaf struggled against the urge to turn tail and flee back to the river-cave. The fox cub’s whimpering echoed off the walls, confusing her senses and disorienting her. She paused when she felt cold air blowing on one side of her head. There was an opening to another tunnel here; had the cub gone this way? She listened for a moment. There was a tiny scraping noise, as if soft pads were shuffling against the stone. If the fox really had gone down here, it would be truly stuck, because this particular tunnel got narrower and narrower until it ended abruptly in a rockfall. Which meant that if Hollyleaf followed the cub, she could get trapped in a dead end....

Hollyleaf took a deep breath and stepped into the tunnel. Almost at once, the fox let out a shriek as if it had heard her approaching. “It’s all right, I’m not going to hurt you!” Hollyleaf called into the darkness. There was a fast scrabbling sound, and a wave of fox-scented fear rolled down the passage toward her. Hollyleaf reminded herself that this was just a lost and scared youngster, so she wasn’t in any danger. She padded closer. “Hush, don’t be frightened,” she murmured.

The scrabbling stopped, and Hollyleaf guessed the fox was pressed against the rockfall with nowhere else to go. It let out the tiniest whine. “Poor little scrap,” Hollyleaf mewed, as if she were comforting a kit. “Did you get lost?”

She took another step forward, and her muzzle bumped against soft, strong-smelling fur. Trying not to gag, Hollyleaf gave it a lick. The fox tensed, rigid as a rock, then relaxed as she kept licking. Feeling bolder, Hollyleaf moved closer to where she guessed the cub’s head was. Her nose touched the tip of a feather-soft ear. “It’s all right, you’re safe now,” she whispered between licks.

The cub’s head drooped until it rested against Hollyleaf’s chest. She felt the faint tickle of its whiskers as it tucked its chin under its front paws. Hollyleaf wriggled closer until her body was curled around as much of the fox as she could reach. She could feel its breath slowing and becoming steadier. She stopped licking and rested her head on the fox’s neck. “Sleep, little one,” she murmured. She pressed close to the cold fur beside her, hoping that some of her warmth would seep in. It crossed her mind that none of her former Clanmates would ever believe she had slept next to a fox. But she wasn’t in the Clan anymore, and this cub needed her, just as a kit needed its mother. Hollyleaf shifted her head into a more comfortable position and closed her eyes.

She was woken by something pinching her front leg. Was Fallen Leaves getting her attention by *biting* her? Hollyleaf opened her eyes to a faint gray light. A shape loomed over her, and when she looked down at her leg she saw tiny white teeth sinking into her fur. "Ow!" she yelped, scrambling free.

The fox cub tipped its head to one side and looked at her. "*Yip!*"

Hollyleaf backed away. The cub was bigger than she remembered, twice as broad as her across its shoulders, and its teeth were small but definitely sharp. "Okaaaay," she mewed, taking another step until she was safely out of reach. "Let's get you out of these tunnels."

The fox bounced to its feet, filling the space. Hollyleaf braced herself. There was no sign that the cub thought she was prey; in fact, it looked as if it wanted to play. It let out another high-pitched bark and bounced on its front feet. Hollyleaf turned and looked back over her shoulder. It went against all her instincts to have the fox behind her, because now she felt as if she was being chased. *Not chased—followed*, she told herself firmly. "Come on!" she meowed.

She took a few steps forward. The fox ran after her, then stopped and whined. Hollyleaf looked at the tunnel ahead. It vanished into blackness, compared with the pale light that filled this section. "It's okay," she told the cub. "This is the way out, I promise." She padded into the shadows, but the fox stayed where it was. There was a soft thump, and Hollyleaf realized it had sat down. Sighing, she turned back and squeezed in beside it. "Get up," she urged, nudging the cub's flank with her muzzle. "You can't stay here!"

She jabbed its haunches with her paw and the fox jumped up with a yelp. Hollyleaf gave it another shove with her nose. "Come on, I'll be right beside you." The cub took a cautious step and Hollyleaf stayed close, pressing against its flank. "That's right!" she mewed.

Slowly, they inched their way along the tunnel. The fox stopped dead when they reached the junction with the woods-tunnel, but Hollyleaf nudged and shoved and encouraged it around the corner until they could feel the breeze from outside on their faces. The fox let out a cheerful-sounding yelp and broke into a trot. Overconfident, it crashed into the opposite wall and sat down with a bump, whimpering. Hollyleaf ran forward and licked the fox's muzzle. She couldn't taste any blood, so it wasn't seriously hurt. "You silly thing," she scolded. "Stay beside me until you can see, okay?"

She knew the fox couldn't understand what she was saying, but it still walked more slowly as they rounded the curve in the tunnel. Gray light spilled in ahead of them, painfully bright like before. The fox blinked and whined, rubbing its eyes with a front paw.

"It's because you've been in the dark for a while," Hollyleaf explained. "Keep going; you're nearly there!" She reached up and licked the cub's ears, and a picture of Squirrelflight doing the same to her burst into her mind. She'd fallen into a puddle and her mother had

whisked her back to the nursery to dry her off. *Her mother.* Suddenly Hollyleaf missed Squirrelflight with a physical pain.

The fox jumped up and trotted on. It picked up speed as its eyes grew used to the light, and Hollyleaf hung back, resisting the urge to stay pressed against its warm fur. The cub didn't belong here. It needed to be back with its mother, in their den in the woods. Suddenly the cub stopped, right at the entrance. It looked back at Hollyleaf and let out a questioning bark.

Hollyleaf shook her head. "I can't come with you, little one," she meowed. "This is my home." The words caught in her throat like a gristly piece of fresh-kill.

There was a loud yelp from beyond the mouth of the tunnel. The cub's head whipped around, its ears pricked. It let out a yip, and there was another bark, confident and joyous. "That's your mother, isn't it?" Hollyleaf whispered.

The cub bounded forward and vanished into the circle of whiteness. Hollyleaf crept along the tunnel until she could see the trees outside. The tunnel opened into a wood much like ThunderClan territory, with a mix of trees and dense undergrowth. The light crashed into Hollyleaf's eyes and she narrowed them as much as she could. Her ears rang with the sound of leaves rustling, birds singing, and the thunder of paws as cub and mother fox raced toward each other. Blinking, Hollyleaf watched as they collided in a tumble of russet fur. The cub let out a volley of excited yelps as its mother bundled it over, sniffing every part of its fur.

"You're safe now," Hollyleaf murmured, trying to ignore the lump of sadness in her chest. "You're back where you belong." The sight of the cub butting his mother's belly for milk mixed with images of Hollyleaf squirming with her littermates in the Clan nursery, bathed in comforting scents of food. *I was happy then, before I knew the truth,* she thought. *But that life is over now.*



CHAPTER 6

Leaf-fall had settled over the woods and the ground was covered in a layer of brittle red-and-orange leaves. As Hollyleaf watched from the mouth of the tunnel, the breeze snatched another flurry of leaves from a beech tree and dangled them in the air before letting them float down to the floor. A voice behind made her jump.

“Are you looking for the cub?”

Hollyleaf spun around, her fur pricking with guilt. “Fallen Leaves! How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to see how much you want to be out there,” meowed the ginger-and-white tom.

Hollyleaf stood to the side, leaving room for him to join her at the entrance, but Fallen Leaves stayed where he was, with his paws hidden in shadow.

“Are you hoping the cub will come back?” Fallen Leaves teased, but his voice sounded hollow in the echoing tunnel.

“Of course not,” Hollyleaf meowed. “I know he belongs out there, in the woods, with his mother.”

“And what about you?” Fallen Leaves pressed softly. “Do you belong out there, with your family?”

Hollyleaf turned her face away. “I have no family,” she growled.

“We all have family,” sighed Fallen Leaves.

“Really? Then where are your kin?” Hollyleaf challenged. “You say you came from a large group of cats, but what happened to them? We’ve never seen any traces of other cats living near here.”

Fallen Leaves looked down at his paws. “They left,” he whispered.

“Then let’s go look for them!” Hollyleaf declared. “There must be some signs of where they’ve gone.”

To her surprise, Fallen Leaves’s eyes stretched wide with horror.

“No! I must stay here! If I leave, how will my mother know where to find me? She’ll come for me one day. I know she will.”

Hollyleaf fought down a spurt of impatience. “But we could find her first! Come with me. I’ll look after you.”

“I don’t need looking after,” Fallen Leaves hissed. “I just need to stay here. You go if you want. I can’t leave.” He turned and stalked into the darkness. Hollyleaf stared after him, feeling wretched. So many things he said didn’t make sense. Why hadn’t his mother come looking for him before? She must have watched him go into the tunnels, so why didn’t she start searching for him as soon as he didn’t come out? But Fallen Leaves never gave a straight answer. He seemed determined to be as mysterious as possible, and sometimes Hollyleaf wondered if he even wanted company in his underground home. *Well, I don’t have to stay here with him.* She lifted her head and let the scents of the forest drift over her muzzle: earth, leaves, squirrel, and the musky scent of a vole hiding among some pine logs.... What was she doing, lurking in the tunnels when she could be living outside, where she belonged?

Hollyleaf raced after Fallen Leaves. When she burst into the river-cave, he was curled beneath the rocky ledge with his nose tucked under his tail. He wasn’t asleep, though; his eyes were wide open, gleaming in the pale gray light.

“You saved my life,” Hollyleaf blurted out, skidding to a halt in front of him. “And I will always be grateful for that. But you’re right. I need to be outside, eating squirrels and mice instead of fish, where I can see the sky and feel the wind in my fur—”

“Then go,” Fallen Leaves interrupted her. “No one said you had to stay here.”

Hollyleaf stared at him. Did he care so little about her that he wouldn’t even try to make her stay? Well, she didn’t need him either! “Good,” she snapped. “I just thought I’d let you know that I’m going in case you wonder where I am.”

Fallen Leaves shrugged and flicked the end of his tail over his nose again. Hollyleaf had the distinct feeling that she’d been dismissed. Trying not to feel wounded, she turned and padded back into the woods-tunnel. She walked slowly at first, half-expecting Fallen Leaves to come racing after her, begging her to change her mind. But the shadows behind her stayed obstinately silent.

The wind was colder than Hollyleaf remembered, pricking her fur even though she tried to stay in the shelter of the widest trunks. The light was fading and shadows spread from the base of every tree, but somehow this darkness was less comfortable than being in the tunnels and Hollyleaf found herself tripping over every fallen twig and clump of moss. Gritting her teeth, she picked her way into a dense thicket of brambles. Had thorns always dragged her fur like this? And were the

leafless trees always so noisy as they clattered their branches together? Hollyleaf's ears were too full to pick up the movements of any prey, and her eyesight was oddly fuzzy when she tried to look farther than a fox-length. She kept telling herself that this was just the same as ThunderClan territory, but it wasn't at all, really: There were no familiar scent markers or paths through the bushes, no sign that cats had ever been here before.

Hollyleaf battled her way to the middle of the brambles and turned in circles beside the knot of trunks until she had cleared a small, roughly circular space. She clawed at the dry grass to make a nest to lie on, then curled up and tucked her muzzle under her tail. Her belly growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since her morning "hunt" in the underground river, but there was no chance of catching any prey tonight. Hollyleaf pressed her spine against the clutch of bramble trunks, wishing it were Fallen Leaves beside her. Even though he never gave off any warmth, he had been oddly companionable on the rare nights he'd shared her nest. *Is he sorry that he let me go?*

Hollyleaf woke before dawn, too hungry to sleep any longer. She crawled out of the brambles and sniffed the air. The scent of rain was carried on the wind and she shivered. Her prickly den wouldn't be completely waterproof, so she'd need to find some big leaves to weave into the stems immediately above her head. But first she had to hunt. Milky light was filtering down through the branches, just enough to reveal a tiny trail of footprints across the leaf mulch beneath a beech tree. Hollyleaf dropped into the hunter's crouch, her muscles stiff and protesting after moons of not being used. She stalked forward, stepping lightly as she strained to hear the faint telltale rustle of prey. At the base of the trunk, a leaf moved and the tip of a smooth brown tail peeped out. Hollyleaf sprang and landed squarely on the back of the mouse, killing it with a swift bite to the neck.

It tasted like fresh-kill fit for StarClan. Hollyleaf ate where she crouched, relishing each mouthful. Her belly rumbled in appreciation—and almost at once clenched with pain. Hollyleaf hissed through her teeth. It had been a long time since she'd eaten this much. Perhaps she should have saved half the mouse for later, in her own fresh-kill pile. She lifted her head, looking around for the best place to store her catches. Then she shrugged. If she was only feeding herself, what was the point of storing prey? She'd hunt and eat when she was hungry, that's all. Like a rogue would...

Hollyleaf stood up and trotted briskly through the trees. She wasn't a rogue, was she? She was a Clan cat with no Clan, that's all. Not a rogue, or a loner, or, StarClan forbid, a kittypet. None of those. A *murderer*, whispered a tiny voice inside her head, but Hollyleaf flattened her ears and ignored it, pushing on as the ground sloped upward. With her head down, she wasn't aware of the woods thinning out until her fur was suddenly blasted by the wind. Startled, she looked up to see

that she was nearly at the top of the ridge. Just a few paces more would take her to the peak, and she would be able to look down on the lake, and her old home.

Her paws stayed rooted to the grass. Hollyleaf felt her ears strain for any sound of cats: her former Clanmates on a border patrol, perhaps, or WindClan cats in pursuit of a rabbit. She heard nothing but the wind whistling over the crest and swooping down to rattle the trees below her. Almost without thinking, Hollyleaf started to back away. Part of her longed to hear the distinctive sounds of ThunderClan cats, and race over the ridge to join them; another part feared they might be looking for her to punish her for Ashfur's death. Would Leafpool or Lionblaze and Jayfeather have revealed the truth by now? There was no way she would ever know, because she could never go back. Turning away, Hollyleaf raced down the slope and plunged into the sheltering trees.

A few days later, the first snowfall arrived. Hollyleaf opened her eyes to find her bramble den filled with a strange cloudy light. She pushed her way out and squeaked as a clump of sparkling frost fell onto her neck. She shook it off crossly and jumped clear of the remaining branches. Her paws sank into soft white snow and instantly chilled to the bone. Hollyleaf hissed under her breath as she bounded to the nearest fallen branch, where only a dusting of flakes had settled. The moss was slimy under her paws but at least she was able to shake them clear of the clinging white stuff. She'd be lucky to catch anything to eat today; all the prey would be burrowed far under a warm layer of leaves. In the Clan, Firestar would have stocked up fresh-kill in a hole outside the hollow, where the cold earth would keep it fresh. Hollyleaf's belly rumbled at the thought, and she curled her lip, annoyed with herself for not being better prepared.

She was about to jump down from the branch and attempt to find something to eat when she noticed a trail of paw prints leading away between the trees. They were bigger than hers, but small for a passing dog. The hair prickled on the back of Hollyleaf's neck. With a hiss of displeasure, she plunged her feet back into the snow and went to take a closer look. More than the size and shape of the prints, the distinctive smell told her who had walked this way: a fox! A young fox, judging by its small paws, and was it just her imagination, or did Hollyleaf recognize the lingering scent?

Yes!

It was the cub she had rescued!

Hollyleaf's heart started to beat faster. At that moment, the prospect of seeing the little cub again filled her with more excitement than the idea of finding food. She followed the trail, leaping carefully alongside the tracks so as not to smudge them. They wound through the

trees, heading along the shoulder of the ridge before swerving downward into a dense copse of pine trees. Hollyleaf's legs were aching from jumping through the snow, and it got deeper the farther down the hill she went, but she wasn't going to give up now. The scent of the cub had gotten stronger and the tracks were even clearer, as if it had only just walked this way.

The pine trees opened out in a little clearing where the snow was scuffed and heaped up amid deep claw marks and scarlet-stained feathers. Hollyleaf wrinkled her nose as the scent of blood filled the air. The fox must have killed a pigeon here, she decided, studying the broad gray feathers. She felt a flash of pride, as if she'd mentored the cub herself.

There was a noise behind her and the sharp smell washed over her more strongly than ever. Hollyleaf turned, a purr rising in her throat. The cub was standing at the edge of the clearing, watching her. Its ears were pricked and the tip of its bushy tail brushed the snow. This was definitely her fox! He was growing into a handsome male, his fur standing out against the snow almost as scarlet as the pigeon's blood.

"Hello!" Hollyleaf meowed. "Do you remember me?"

With a snarl, the fox leaped at her. Yellow teeth snapped at the air where Hollyleaf's neck had been, a heartbeat after she scrambled backward. She crashed into a pine tree and spun around to claw her way up the trunk, with the creature snapping barely a whisker's length from her paws. The tree was circled with moss halfway up and Hollyleaf's claws lost their grip; she slithered down, feeling branches jab her ribs and flanks, and the cub jumped up, yelping with hunger and excitement. Hollyleaf dug her claws into the bark and managed to stop her fall just as teeth closed on the fur at the end of her tail. She tore herself free and scrambled to the topmost branches, fear propelling her upward. Below her, the cub snarled in frustration.

Hollyleaf huddled on a thin branch that swayed beneath her weight. She peered down through the dark green pine needles and watched the fox circling far below. *Of course he doesn't remember me. I'm nothing more than prey!* Hollyleaf sank her claws into the branch, closed her eyes, and waited for her heart to stop trying to punch its way out of her chest.

When she opened her eyes again, it was dark. Fear and flight must have exhausted her enough to sleep on her uncomfortable perch. The woods were silent, and all she could smell was snow and the stinging scent of pinesap. The cub was long gone. Above the trees, a full silver moon floated in the sky, surrounded by dazzling stars. The forest was bathed in crisp white light, and Hollyleaf could see all the way to the top of the ridge. On the other side, the four Clans would be meeting on the island for the Gathering. Would her name be mentioned? Did any cat ever wonder what had happened to her? Hollyleaf felt a wave of misery so intense she almost lost her grip on the branch. When it

dipped alarmingly beneath her, she came to her senses and eased herself down the trunk to the snowy ground.

There was a sharp pain in her belly, and as Hollyleaf trekked back through the trees she paused by a clump of yarrow that had been sheltered from the snow to eat a few leaves. But the ache inside her persisted, and Hollyleaf knew it was more than hunger: It was loneliness, and regret, and sadness. There was only one place she could go. Fluffing up her pelt against the bitter cold, Hollyleaf began to trudge up the slope.

Dawn was breaking by the time she arrived, lightening the shadows cast by the trees in the moonlight and rousing a few birds into song. Hollyleaf staggered the last few paces and paused at the entrance, gasping for breath. The tunnel yawned ahead of her, warm and dark and welcoming.

“Fallen Leaves!” she called as she plunged inside. “Fallen Leaves, are you there?”



CHAPTER 7

Hollyleaf slept for two whole days after her return. Fallen Leaves brought her fish to eat when she briefly stirred, and some herbs that she didn't recognize for the niggling cough that developed as soon as she was out of the constant wind. Her nest was where she had left it, but softer and deeper than she remembered.

"I added more feathers," Fallen Leaves admitted shyly. "In case you came back." Then he climbed delicately alongside her, and curled his cold body around hers while she drifted back to sleep.

Finally she woke with a clearer head, feeling hungry and restless. Yellow light seeped into the tunnel, hinting at sunshine outside. Hollyleaf was alone in her nest but Fallen Leaves appeared almost at once, carrying a minnow.

"Here, eat this," he urged, dropping it beside her.

It didn't taste as good as the mice and squirrels in the woods—nothing would taste that good again, Hollyleaf suspected—but she swallowed it obediently, feeling strength flow back into her legs. Fallen Leaves sat beside her nest and watched.

"I saw the fox cub again," Hollyleaf announced as she cleaned the last traces of fish from her whiskers.

Fallen Leaves looked surprised. "Are you sure it was the same one?"

"Definitely. I knew its scent right away."

"Did it recognize you?" Fallen Leaves asked.

Hollyleaf looked down at her paws and shook her head. She felt stupid and embarrassed to admit what she had done, but she hoped Fallen Leaves wouldn't judge her too harshly. "It saw me as a juicy piece of prey," she mewed quietly. "I only just got away."

She felt something soft on her ear as Fallen Leaves touched her

with the tip of his tail. "I'm so sorry. You save his life, and he repays you like that? Honestly, some animals have no gratitude!"

There was a note of barely suppressed amusement in his voice and Hollyleaf looked up to see his eyes shining with humor. "I guess it was kind of mouse-brained to think he'd remember me," she admitted.

"Just a bit!" Fallen Leaves exploded. "What did you think would happen? That he'd take you to his den to meet his mother?"

Hollyleaf shrugged. "I was so lonely," she murmured. "I just wanted a friend."

In an instant Fallen Leaves was crouched beside her, pressing his fur against hers. "And you have a friend," he insisted. "Right here. Now, I've been awfully lazy about doing patrols while you were away. Should we start with a check of the tunnels—just in case that cub thinks about following you—and then see if you can remember how to catch a fish?"

Later, when the holes in the roof were dark and Hollyleaf's paws were aching from running on stone, she lay in her nest of feathers and felt the pain of loneliness ease. She let out a purr, and Fallen Leaves stirred beside her.

"What are you thinking about?" he murmured.

"How glad I am that I came back," Hollyleaf answered honestly. "I'm not cut out to live alone, I guess."

Fallen Leaves licked her ear. "I'm glad you came back, too."

Hollyleaf swiveled around to face him. "Do you ever think about the cats you left behind?"

"All the time," Fallen Leaves meowed softly. "But it's been so long, I don't remember that much."

Hollyleaf blinked. She'd been away from ThunderClan for several moons but she hadn't forgotten a thing. "How many seasons have you been in the tunnels?"

Fallen Leaves shrugged and turned his face away. "More than I can count. But it's too late to change anything now."

Hollyleaf knew better than to suggest he go looking for his old community again. Instead, she settled herself more comfortably against his flank and prompted, "Tell me about your family. You must remember them."

"My mother was called Broken Shadow. She was very kind and beautiful. She... she didn't want me to go into the tunnels. I think she knew something bad would happen."

"Couldn't she stop you?" Hollyleaf asked.

"Not if I was going to be a sharpclaw," Fallen Leaves replied. "That's what I wanted, more than anything." He trailed off, sounding achingly sad. Then he shook himself. "That's all a long way in the past. What about your mother? Did you tell her you were leaving the Clan?"

Hollyleaf started slicing one of the feathers with her claw. "Not

exactly," she muttered.

Fallen Leaves stiffened. "You mean, she has no idea where you are? What if she thinks you're dead?"

"It's probably best if she does," Hollyleaf whispered. As she spoke, she wondered which cat she was referring to: Leafpool, her real mother; or Squirrelflight, the cat who had raised her. "It's complicated," she confessed. "I... I have two mothers."

Behind her, she sensed Fallen Leaves prick up his ears. "Two?"

"My real mother, Leafpool, is a medicine cat. She's not supposed to have kits but she ran away with Crowfeather from WindClan, and when she came back, she gave birth to me and my brothers. To hide what she'd done, she gave us to her sister, Squirrelflight, who pretended we were her kits. Even Squirrelflight's mate, Brambleclaw, thought he was our father!"

Fallen Leaves was quiet for a moment. Then he asked, "Do you think Squirrelflight loved you?"

"Oh yes," Hollyleaf meowed. "I mean, she fussed over us all the time, just like the other queens in the nursery. But she lied to us! She only told us the truth when another cat forced her to."

"What about... Leafpool, is it? How did she act toward you?"

Hollyleaf sighed. "She always took an interest in us, but I thought it was because Squirrelflight was her sister. I was her apprentice for a while, in the medicine den, but then I decided to train as a warrior instead. I liked working with her; it just wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

"And Leafpool knows that you found out the truth?" Fallen Leaves asked.

"Yes," meowed Hollyleaf, wincing as she recalled her final, furious confrontation with the ThunderClan medicine cat. "I... I told her she deserved to die for what she had done, but she said the worst pain of all was having to live with it." Hollyleaf stopped talking and looked down at the splinters of feather at her feet.

"It seems to me," Fallen Leaves began carefully, "that both of these cats loved you very much. Surely two mothers are better than none? And whatever you did before you came here, they must both hope that you are alive and safe."

"I guess," Hollyleaf admitted. She shoved the feather splinters out of the nest. "But how can they live with all these secrets? The truth is all that matters!"

"Not always," mewed Fallen Leaves. "Perhaps those cats believed they were doing the right thing for you and your brothers. You can't punish them for loving you too much, Hollyleaf."

He patted her shoulder with his paw, and Hollyleaf lay down again. She couldn't deny that Fallen Leaves was right: Squirrelflight and Leafpool *had* loved her. But everything had been complicated by secrets and lies—and by the fact that Hollyleaf had killed Ashfur to keep him

from telling everyone. *But then I realized it would never stay secret, so I told all the Clans at the Gathering.* Ashfur's death had been for nothing, and Hollyleaf had had no choice but to leave.

Outside, the weather turned even colder. There were fewer fish in the underground river so Hollyleaf made forays into the woods, leaving the tunnels just long enough to catch a mouse or squirrel and once a rather scrawny pigeon. Fallen Leaves never went with her; he had been out a few times, he said, to gather herbs when Hollyleaf first entered the tunnels, but he didn't feel like he belonged there. Hollyleaf's heart always twisted with sadness when she saw her friend's ginger-and-white face peeking from the shadows, watching anxiously as she hunted. Fallen Leaves seemed to view the tunnels as his home and his prison equally. Did he really believe it was too late to find his family?

Hollyleaf always kept an eye out for the fox cub or his mother, but she saw nothing larger than the pigeon among the snowy trees, and only once a trace of snow-filled tracks leading down to the pine copse. She swerved in the opposite direction, using the scent of yarrow to lead her swiftly back to the mouth of the tunnel. There was a little clump growing just outside the entrance, defying the snow with its furry green leaves.

Every time Hollyleaf went outside, she found herself listening for signs of the cats on the other side of the ridge. Were her Clanmates managing to find enough prey in the snow? Were the elders strong and fit? Several times her paws seemed to lead her up to the top of the ridge without her noticing, until she was barely fox-lengths away from the ThunderClan border. But the thought of coming face-to-face with one of her former Clanmates made the blood freeze in her veins, and each time Hollyleaf whirled around at the last moment and ran back down to where Fallen Leaves was waiting for her.

After a quarter moon the snow clouds lifted, leaving a clear sky and crisp, still air. Hollyleaf buried herself in her nest, trying to get warm, but her mind was full of what might be happening in the hollow. She sat up, knowing she wasn't going to sleep now. The tunnel was filled with silvery light, so bright it was almost like sunshine. Hollyleaf stepped out of her nest and trotted along the passage to the river-cave. It was empty, apart from dazzling light that beamed into every corner and turned the river white. Hollyleaf tipped back her head and strained to look through the hole in the roof. Far, far above, a perfect round moon drifted across the sky. It was a cold night for a Gathering. Hollyleaf pictured the cats huddling together in the hollow, steam rising from their muzzles as they listened to each leader speak.

"You miss your Clanmates, don't you?" murmured Fallen Leaves behind her.

Hollyleaf jumped. She hadn't heard him enter the cave. "I just want

to know that they're okay," she mewed, feeling a flash of guilt. "Leaf-bare can be so hard in the Clans, and with all this snow, they might not have found enough to eat."

Fallen Leaves held up one paw to stop her. "So go and see them."

"I can't! They have to believe I'm gone forever!"

"Visit them without being seen, if that's what you want," Fallen Leaves suggested. "You can't spend all your time watching the moon, and wondering."

Hollyleaf flinched. Perhaps he was right. She knew her old territory well enough to stay hidden. If she could just make sure ThunderClan was surviving the harsh season, she would be able to sleep again.



CHAPTER 8

Hollyleaf felt as though a swarm of bees were buzzing in each of her paws as soon as she decided to go back to ThunderClan in secret, but she forced herself to wait a quarter moon until the sky was less brightly lit. Just before dawn, when the night was at its darkest point, Fallen Leaves led her to a tunnel that wasn't much wider than a rabbit hole. This was one of the few remaining clear entrances to ThunderClan. Hollyleaf tried to thank him again before she squeezed into the last section, but he turned away before she could say anything and was quickly swallowed up by the shadows.

I'll come back, I promise! Hollyleaf called after him silently.

Hollyleaf crouched down and wriggled into the tiny hole. The roof scraped her ears and for a moment she felt as if she were being buried alive. Her heart sped up in panic and her breath came in shallow gasps, but she kept dragging herself forward with her front paws.

Suddenly fresh air burst onto her face, and the sound of branches whispering in the wind filled her ears. Hollyleaf stood up, drinking in the familiar scents of cats and trails and border markers. She was home!

No! This is not my home now.

Shaking dirt from her fur, Hollyleaf trotted into a patch of ferns and circled a lone oak tree. After checking to make sure there were no cats out on night patrol, she crossed a narrow trail that ran along the top of the cliff. Hollyleaf told herself she was trembling from cold, but she could smell fear on her pelt and she knew she was terrified of being discovered. When an owl flapped noisily from a branch overhead, she nearly fell over with fright. She ducked into a clump of brambles and pushed her way through until she emerged at the very edge of the cliff. She crouched down and peered over.

The hollow was thick with shadows and Hollyleaf couldn't make

out any individual dens, but something felt wrong. The noise of the wind echoing off the cliffs was different, and the black shapes below weren't the same as she remembered. It was as if trees had grown inside the camp since she left, full-branched and heavy with brittle leaves. That was impossible!

As she stared, a line of yellow light appeared above the ridge behind her. Dawn was breaking, and it thinned the shadows just enough for Hollyleaf to see a huge tree filling the hollow—not growing, but lying on its side with its roots crumpled in the corner where the medicine den was. Hollyleaf stiffened in horror. If a tree that big had fallen from the top of the cliff, it must have crushed cats beneath it! It was lying directly on top of the warriors' and elders' dens. How could something so terrible have happened to her Clan, yet she had known nothing about it? Couldn't StarClan have told her in a dream?

Perhaps StarClan has disowned me, now that I'm no longer part of a Clan.

Hollyleaf realized she was shaking so much, she was in danger of slipping over the edge. She backed away a little, just as the branches of the fallen tree quivered and two cats stepped gingerly into the cold air. Their breath formed clouds around the muzzles.

"I can go to the dirtplace on my own," Mousefur was grumbling. The air was so still that her voice reached Hollyleaf all the way on top of the cliff.

"I know you can," Purdy rasped. "But there's no harm in having company, is there?"

"I don't seem to have any choice," Mousefur muttered as the old brown tom ushered her across the clearing and into the brambles that filled the entrance to the hollow.

Hollyleaf leaned forward, feeling a thrill of delight. *My Clanmates!*

"Briarlight!" called a voice from the medicine den. "I can bring you something to eat if you're hungry. There's no need to fetch it yourself." It was Jayfeather, sounding as if he'd just woken up.

"I still have two legs that work," came the reply, as a dark brown she-cat emerged from beneath the tangled roots.

Briarkit? Hollyleaf stared in disbelief as the young cat dragged herself over the ground with her front paws, while her hind legs trailed uselessly behind her. Millie burst out of the middle of the fallen branches.

"What are you doing? You only went this far yesterday! You should be resting!" she scolded.

Briarlight—Jayfeather had used her warrior name, although she clearly wasn't going on any patrols—swerved to avoid her mother. "I'm fine," she hissed between clenched teeth. "You can't do everything for me!"

Millie bent down and licked her daughter's ears. "I wish I could," she murmured.

How had Briarlight been so badly hurt? Had it been when the tree fell? I should have been here! Hollyleaf sank her claws into the crumbling soil at the edge of the cliff. A few tiny stones were dislodged and clattered down into the clearing. Hollyleaf froze.

A familiar dark tabby pelt emerged from the branches. Brambleclaw looked up toward Hollyleaf's hiding place, his eyes narrowing. She shrank back and held her breath. Then she heard him call, "Lionblaze? Cinderheart? Take the border patrol around the top of the hollow, will you? Dovepaw and Ivypaw can go with you."

There was the sound of cats gathering below. Hollyleaf risked one more glance over the edge. Her heart nearly broke when she saw her brother Lionblaze circling around Cinderheart, the tip of his tail tracing her soft gray fur. Dovepaw and Ivypaw—they had been tiny kits when Hollyleaf left, and now they were strong, confident-looking apprentices!—bounced around them looking eager to be out on patrol.

"Did Brambleclaw hear a fox?" Ivypaw asked excitedly.

Dovepaw had tipped her head to one side and was looking thoughtful. "I don't think so," she mewed.

Lionblaze started to lead them toward the barrier of thorns. Hollyleaf knew she had to leave. She just hoped her pelt still held enough ThunderClan scent that she couldn't be tracked back to the tunnel. Luckily the ferns were soaking wet from frost-melt, which made them less likely to hold traces of her. She pushed her way through, wincing as the cold water pierced through to her skin, then raced for the tunnel. She could hear Lionblaze bringing the patrol up the side of the hollow. Ivypaw was running ahead, reporting back on every bush and bramble that she sniffed.

"Nothing here! No fox came this way!"

Hollyleaf paused for a moment, suddenly wild with hope that they would find her and take her back to the Clan. Surely she was missed in some small way? Then she thought of everything that had happened, the truth that Leafpool, Jayfeather, and Lionblaze had discovered, and she knew the Clan was better off without her. With a tiny sigh, she ducked into the narrow hole and let the shadows engulf her.

"And then I saw Briarkit—well, she's Briarlight now—and she's lost the use of her hind legs! She was dragging herself on her belly across the clearing. Maybe the tree fell on her. I should have been there to help!" Hollyleaf stopped to take a breath, aware that she hadn't stopped talking since she returned.

From his seat beside the river, Fallen Leaves looked at her. It was a gloomy day and there was barely any light filtering into the cave, but Hollyleaf could see his eyes shining faintly. "You couldn't have stopped the tree from falling," he pointed out. "Anyway, you chose to leave, remember?"

Hollyleaf scraped her paw over the stone. "It didn't feel like I had a choice at the time," she murmured. "I... I haven't told you everything about what happened. It wasn't just that I found out about Squirrelflight and Leafpool lying to me. Another cat found out as well, a cat called Ashfur. He threatened to tell all the Clans the truth so I... so I killed him."

There was a long silence. Hollyleaf risked glancing up at Fallen Leaves. He was staring into the river. "Did the Clan send you away when they found out?" Fallen Leaves asked quietly.

"No! They never knew! Only Leafpool found out, and then I told Jayfeather and Lionblaze. I wanted them to know why I had to leave."

"But you could go back," Fallen Leaves meowed, suddenly lifting his gaze. "Your brothers and Leafpool love you too much to tell the truth about Ashfur. Your secret will still be safe."

"You don't know that!" Hollyleaf wailed.

"I think I do," Fallen Leaves argued. "Everything you've told me proves how important you were to your kin."

"You don't understand," Hollyleaf mewled wretchedly. "Too much has happened. The Clan doesn't need me anymore."

Fallen Leaves turned away. "Your Clan will always need you," he whispered as he padded into the shadows.

Hollyleaf managed to wait for three more quarter moons before going back to her spying place above the hollow. Snow had fallen again, turned to silver sparkles by the harsh frost. Hollyleaf crouched among the brittle grass, shivering, and watched the Clan slowly wake up below her. Brambleclaw sent a patrol of sleepy warriors to check the WindClan border. Hollyleaf was startled by how thin her Clanmates looked. She searched the clearing for any sign of a fresh-kill pile, but there were only a few scraps of fur and feathers beside the tree trunk. Prey must be scarce after such a long spell of harsh weather.

There was a scrabble of movement at the far end of the fallen tree, where the prickly nursery walls were just visible. Poppyfrost's voice rose up, high with frustration.

"Cherrykit! You're not going outside with that cough! Molekit, bring your sister back at once!"

Two tiny, fluffed-up shapes burst out of the brambles and scooted across the clearing. The ginger she-cat in front stopped as her little body was racked with coughs, and her cream-and-brown littermate skidded to a halt beside her. "You can't come out to play today," he mewled. "You know what Poppyfrost said."

A tortoiseshell she-cat slid through the wall of the nursery and bent over the ginger kit. "Come on, little one," Poppyfrost murmured. "Back to the nest with you."

"Can't Jayfeather give me some medicine?" pleaded Cherrykit,

gazing up at her mother with huge amber eyes.

"He said he's run out of yarrow," Poppyfrost explained. There was a tense note of worry in her voice, though Hollyleaf could tell she was trying to hide it from the kits. "I'm sure he'll find some today, and then you'll feel much better."

She ushered her kit back to the nursery, leaving Molekit pottering around the clearing on his own. Hollyleaf narrowed her eyes. She knew where there was fresh yarrow growing. She whirled around and ran back to the tunnel. She was used to the tight squeeze now, and hauled herself through without thinking about it. Then she raced through the tunnels, her paws firm and sure-footed on the cool, damp stone. There was no sign of Fallen Leaves as she burst into the river-cave. Leaping over the water, Hollyleaf darted into the woods-tunnel and followed it to the end, plunging out into daylight just as a pale yellow sun broke over the trees.

Thank StarClan!

The clump of yarrow was still growing by the mouth of the tunnel, fresh and green-smelling in spite of the frost. Hollyleaf nipped off as many stalks as she could carry, then headed back into the tunnel, being careful not to step on the trailing leaves. When she emerged from the narrow hole into ThunderClan territory, she put down the yarrow and sniffed the air. A patrol had just passed by, which meant she should have enough time to take the herbs down to the bottom of the cliff. Hollyleaf tried to slow her heart. It was pounding so hard, her paws were shaking in time. It was too early for many cats to be outside the camp, and the patrol was heading in the opposite direction. If she ran fast, and kept to the shadows, there was no reason she would be seen.

She didn't give herself another moment to change her mind. She picked up the yarrow leaves and hared down the trail that led to the bottom of the cliff. Skidding around the corner, she almost crashed into the brambles that shielded the dirtplace.

A voice growled from inside, "Wait your turn!"

Hollyleaf bit back an instinctive apology and darted around the edge of the barrier. There was no cat on guard now that dawn had come. She dropped the herbs close to the well-hidden pathway through the thorns. The next cat to come out would find them. Cherrykit could be treated before the sun rose any higher.

As she heard a cat pushing through the brambles from the other side, Hollyleaf whisked around and raced back up the cliff. Her Clanmates might wonder who had delivered herbs so conveniently, but with luck they'd assume one of the apprentices had collected them unasked. No cat needed to know that Hollyleaf had returned to help them.

Not all secrets were terrible.



CHAPTER 9

“Cherrykit has stopped coughing! Poppyfrost looks so relieved. She was playing with the kits this morning, teaching them how to pounce on a ball of moss. I remember when Squirrelflight showed us our first pounce...” Hollyleaf trailed off.

Fallen Leaves, sitting next to her by the edge of the underground river, twitched one ear. “The yarrow leaves worked, then,” he meowed.

“They must have!” Hollyleaf jumped to her paws and faced him. “Do you think I should take some more? What about marigold? Or catmint—do you know if there is any growing near the woods-tunnel?”

“No, I don’t know,” Fallen Leaves answered with a hint of impatience. “I don’t need herbs for myself, so why would I go looking for them?”

“But you found comfrey for me, and poppy seeds,” Hollyleaf reminded him. “When I’d hurt my leg.”

The tip of Fallen Leaves’s tail flicked. “That was different,” he muttered. “You were right in front of me. I could hardly leave you to suffer, could I?”

“Well, ThunderClan is right above our heads!” Hollyleaf countered. “The warrior code says we must protect the kits of all Clans, not just our own. If we gather herbs that will help Cherrykit and Molekit through leaf-bare, we are only obeying the code.”

“It’s not *my* code,” Fallen Leaves mewed, turning away. “Good luck hunting for herbs if that’s what you want to do.” He padded into the tunnel that led back to Hollyleaf’s nest.

Hollyleaf watched him vanish into the shadows. He was behaving very oddly. She hadn’t seen him at all for several days, and the only creatures she’d had for company were her Clanmates when she spied on them from the top of the cliff. Fallen Leaves never shared her nest now,

and never came to watch her hunt from the mouth of the woods-tunnel. Had she done something to upset him?

Perhaps he doesn't like the fact that I spend so much time in ThunderClan.

Hollyleaf's pelt prickled with guilt. It was true that she went back almost every day to see what her Clanmates were doing. Poppyfrost's kits were nearly six moons old, so they would be apprenticed soon; Hollyleaf wondered which cats would be chosen as their mentors. If she'd been in the Clan, she would have liked Cherrykit as an apprentice, with her spirit and sense of humor. But she would never be a mentor, not now.

Giving herself a shake, Hollyleaf trotted into the woods-tunnel. She needed to catch something to eat, then she'd scout for fresh herbs. Leaf-bare was at its height, so there were few green leaves anywhere, but she might get lucky in the sheltered spots beneath fallen trees. And maybe she could catch something for Fallen Leaves, to make it up to him for all the time she had spent outside. He had never shared fresh-kill with her before, but perhaps nothing had tempted him. There must be some sort of prey, plump from pinecones and fallen nuts, among these trees that he would be willing to eat.

Hollyleaf caught a squirrel, soft and downy in its pelt of gray fur, but Fallen Leaves was nowhere to be seen when she returned to the tunnels. Hollyleaf ate alone in the river-cave, carefully leaving half for Fallen Leaves before rinsing her muzzle in the icy water. She hadn't found any fresh herbs to take to the Clan, so she headed to her nest, her paws trailing a little from tiredness and disappointment. She curled up on the feathers and tucked her nose under her tail. Tomorrow she'd spend all day with Fallen Leaves—if she could find him—patrolling the tunnels as far as he wanted to go.

She only seemed to have closed her eyes for a moment before Fallen Leaves was nudging her with his paw. "Wake up, Hollyleaf!"

Blearily, Hollyleaf sat up. "Is it dawn already?" she mumbled.

"No!" Fallen Leaves turned a circle, impatience making his fur stand on end. "Two of your Clanmates are in the tunnels!"

Hollyleaf was instantly wide awake. "What? Where? Who is it?"

"I don't know!" Fallen Leaves snapped. "But they can't stay down here. I told them how to get out but they didn't listen and they're still lost. Go and help them, will you?"

"Are they okay?"

"They're well enough to chatter like starlings, so I presume they aren't injured." Fallen Leaves started to walk away. "Just get them back where they belong," he meowed over his shoulder.

Hollyleaf hopped out of her nest and ran to the river-cave. In spite of the river noise, it was the best place to hear if there was anything in

the main tunnels. She crouched by the water and strained her ears. High-pitched, nervous chatter echoed down one of the passages. Hollyleaf leaped up and raced toward the sound, swerving confidently around corners without needing to see her way through the dark. Suddenly the voices sounded very close. The cats were just ahead, invisible in the shadows but near enough that their scent washed over Hollyleaf: She recognized Ivypool, the newest warrior, and Graystripe's daughter Blossomfall. She ducked into a crevice at the side of the passage and listened.

"I wish I'd asked that cat his name," Ivypool was muttering. "We could call for him." There was a pause before she added, "I don't suppose he would have come, anyway."

She must mean Fallen Leaves!

A soft scraping noise suggested that one of the cats had flopped to the ground. "I'm sorry," whispered Blossomfall, sounding breathless and scared. "This is all my fault. I was the one who wanted to come down here."

"I could have stopped you," Ivypool argued.

"How? By hanging on to my tail?"

Hollyleaf admired Blossomfall's spirit. She wondered how the cats had found their way into the tunnels. For a moment the urge to reveal herself to them, to be reunited with her Clanmates, was so strong that her legs trembled.

No! You chose to leave! There is no going back, not now.

But she could still help them find their way out. They'd already met one cat down here; as long as they didn't get too close, they would assume he'd come back to help them a second time. Hollyleaf leaned out of her hiding place and called softly, "Come on! What are you waiting for?"

The air crackled as if both cats had tensed with alarm. Hollyleaf heard Ivypool turn to look down the tunnel, but she knew the shadows would keep her dark pelt safely hidden.

"You do want to get out, don't you?" she prompted. "You know you shouldn't be here."

"Oh yes—please help us!" Blossomfall begged.

"Very well. Follow me." Hollyleaf spun around and ran back down the tunnel, judging by the sound of paw steps behind her how fast she needed to go to stay out of sight, but slow enough that the others could follow. She led them on a deliberately confusing route, down side passages and at one stage crossing a tunnel they'd already been through, in order to discourage the cats from coming back. One of the cats—Hollyleaf thought it was Blossomfall—started to walk more slowly and her breathing grew louder.

"Is it much farther?" Ivypool called.

Hollyleaf didn't reply. Around the next corner, the tunnel sloped steeply up to an old fox hole, long abandoned, that opened into one of

the less trodden corners of ThunderClan territory. There was nowhere for Hollyleaf to hide inside the tunnel, so she would have to risk going out ahead of the cats and hiding in the undergrowth. She raced the last few paces to the entrance, then darted across the short clearing and pushed her way into a clump of ferns. Turning as quietly as she could, she waited, her heart pounding, as the two cats limped out behind her.

Ivypool stopped and looked around. "Where did it go?" she meowed.

Blossomfall looked too worn out to speak. She dragged herself into the open and collapsed into a patch of sunlight beside an oak stump.

Very slowly, Hollyleaf eased herself farther back into the ferns. She froze when Ivypool's ears twitched and she seemed to look straight at Hollyleaf.

"Thank you!" Ivypool called.

Anything for my Clanmates, Hollyleaf replied silently.

Hollyleaf didn't go back to her former home for many moons. She knew she had hurt Fallen Leaves with her constant visits to spy on the hollow, and he deserved more than that from her. They spent the days patrolling the tunnels for unseen enemies, and lying in wait by the river for minnows to slip past. If they spoke less about what had happened in their pasts, or what lay in the future, Hollyleaf told herself it was because they were more comfortable with silence now, like a pair of elders enjoying a quieter, easier life. She still hunted in the woods when she couldn't stand to eat another fish, but Fallen Leaves didn't watch from the mouth of the tunnel, or comment when she came back smelling of blood and feathers. Hollyleaf never tried to catch something for him again, since he hadn't touched the half squirrel she'd left for him on the night Ivypool and Blossomfall got lost. Fallen Leaves wasn't weak with hunger, so he obviously preferred to eat in private. It was one more reminder that he wasn't a Clan cat, but Hollyleaf had chosen not to live as a warrior, hadn't she? She and Fallen Leaves had more in common than the stone roof over their heads.

Leaf-bare yielded to the determined warmth of newleaf, and then greenleaf crept into the woods to leave trails of tempting prey scents and damp green smells. Hollyleaf started to spend longer outside, running through the trees with her whiskers quivering from all the fragrances, or lying on the open grassland to let the sun warm her fur. The days grew hotter until she longed to walk beside the lake and let the waves wash over her paws. The upper slopes of the ridge were her favorite place to cool off in the gentle breeze, until one day she strayed too close to the WindClan border and almost ran into a patrol. She raced back over the crest of the hill and dived into the trees, panting with fright.

When her heart had slowed, she made her way back to the woods-

tunnel, keeping to the shadows in case any WindClan warriors had come in search of the stranger on their territory. Hollyleaf hoped they wouldn't accuse ThunderClan of trespassing. There had been enough trouble between the two Clans since they arrived at the lake, even though the elders told of a time when Firestar and Onestar had been good friends across the Clan divide. Hollyleaf wondered how the ThunderClan cats were dealing with the scorching weather. Were the apprentices on full-time moss duty, bringing water up from the lake? Had Brambleclaw ordered dusk hunting patrols to avoid the worst of the heat?

The woods-tunnel appeared in front of her, but Hollyleaf stopped. Stronger than the sun, she burned to know how her Clanmates were. Almost without thinking about it, she swerved around the entrance to the tunnel and headed up the slope. Trees grew all the way to the top of the ridge here and down the other side, providing cover right to the ThunderClan border. In fact, Hollyleaf almost missed it completely, until she picked up the faint scent of a border mark on a moss-covered tree stump. The markers would dry fast in the sun, and needed replacing more often than once a day. Checking her pace, she crept through the bracken toward the hollow.

A faint, tempting prey-scent drifted toward her. Hollyleaf parted the stems in front of her with one paw and saw the soft brown outline of a rabbit nibbling at a clump of green plants. Hollyleaf's mouth watered but she knew there was no way she could hunt here. She was about to turn away and leave this plump treat for the next patrol when she recognized the scent of the plants that the rabbit was devouring. *Marigold!* Precious for healing wounds and keeping scratches clean, and rare so close to the hollow. Hollyleaf couldn't let the rabbit eat the entire crop. She leaped forward, hissing and baring her teeth. The rabbit froze, then scampered away, its bobbing white tail signaling a warning through the trees.

Hollyleaf fought her instinct to chase after it and focused on the marigolds. Nearly all of them had been eaten down to the roots. Hollyleaf couldn't stay here and guard them, and the rabbit would be back to finish them off as soon as she had left. She had to find a way to keep the last plants safe. Looking around, she spotted a deep cleft between the branch and trunk of a nearby tree, not too far from the ground that it couldn't be seen by a passing cat, but too high for a rabbit to reach. She quickly nipped off the remaining flowers as close to the ground as possible. With her mouth full of juicy stalks, she climbed the tree and placed the flowers in the cleft.

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. In this sun, the plants would soon wilt. They needed water to keep them fresh. Hollyleaf jumped down from the tree and paused for a moment to listen for approaching patrols, then set off through the woods toward the border with WindClan. There, she soaked a ball of moss in the stream and carried it

carefully back to the marigold patch. When she scrambled up the trunk again, water dribbled onto her chest and belly fur, making her gasp in shock. But the moss held on to enough to fill the cleft with a tiny puddle, which would keep the marigold stems wet until Leafpool or Jayfeather came looking for more supplies.

Hollyleaf leaped down to the ground, paused once to check that the marigolds were safely in their hiding place, and raced back to the tunnel. She may not be a part of ThunderClan anymore, but if she could help them, she would.

All that night, Hollyleaf couldn't sleep for thinking about the marigold plants. Had Leafpool found them? Would the Clan be able to protect the rest of the patch from the rabbit? After two more anxious sunrises, she decided to go back and see if the plants had been taken from the cleft in the tree. She ran along the woods-tunnel, feeling light-headed with nervousness. Beyond the entrance, the trees were quiet and greenleaf-heavy, with only the slightest breeze to stir the leaves. Hollyleaf stayed clear of the trails as she pushed her way through the bracken to the place where the marigold grew. Suddenly she heard voices coming toward her, young and excited.

"Watch this, Molepaw!"

Hollyleaf padded to the edge of the brittle ferns and peeped out. A small ginger she-cat was crouching down with her tail stuck in the air.

"I'm going to attack that stick!" she declared.

"Don't forget you're supposed to close one eye, Cherrypaw," mewed the cream-and-brown tom. "Brightheart said we needed to practice all the moves as if we've been injured."

Hollyleaf let out a purr. She remembered being trained by Brightheart in moves specially designed to cope with the loss of sight on one side. She studied Cherrypaw's position. She wasn't doing too badly, although she needed to shift her weight onto the paws on the side of her good eye to improve her balance.

Suddenly Hollyleaf's nose twitched. A new scent had filtered into the bracken, above that of warm young apprentices and green leaves. A scent that made Hollyleaf's fur rise and her claws extend: fox! Before she could call a warning, a huge russet shape crashed out of the trees and loomed over the apprentices. Hollyleaf braced herself to spring, but Brightheart, Foxleap, and Rosepetal were already launching themselves from the bushes on the far side of the clearing.

The three warriors raced at the fox with their teeth bared. "Get out of here!" screeched Rosepetal.

The fox jerked its head up, its eyes widening in alarm. It snapped at Foxleap, who was nearest, but the reddish-furred warrior ducked away and came at the fox from behind, raking his claws down its flank. Brightheart flung herself onto the fox's ear and hung there with her teeth clenched fast. Rosepetal flailed her paws at its nose, sending scarlet beads of blood flying onto the grass. The fox struggled briefly,

then whipped around, flicking Brightheart into the bracken, and raced into the trees. The warriors pelted after it, still yowling.

Hollyleaf stayed where she was, hardly daring to breathe. The bracken had been crushed in the fight, and there was barely enough left standing to keep her hidden. During the scuffle, Cherrypaw and Molepaw had fled to the shelter of a bramble thicket on the far side of the clearing. Hollyleaf could just see them in the shadows, crouching in a three-colored huddle. At least they were safe. She had to get out of here before the warriors came back and picked up her scent on top of the fox's.

Just as she turned to leave, the bracken rattled and the fox leaped back into the clearing. Drool spilled from its jaws and its yellow eyes gleamed with fury and determination. Hollyleaf stared at it in dismay. It must have doubled back and lost its pursuers! The fox lowered its head and sniffed at the patch of grass where the apprentices had been training. Then it looked toward the bramble thicket, its ears flattening. There was a tiny squeak from the thorns, cut off abruptly as if Cherrypaw had whimpered and Molepaw had stuffed his paw in her mouth.

Hollyleaf gathered her haunches beneath her and sprang out of her hiding place. "Get away from those kits!" she hissed. "Or you'll have me to deal with!" She reared up on her hind paws and raked her claws down the fox's blood-spattered muzzle.

The fox glared at her, curling its lip to reveal sharp, stained teeth. Hollyleaf held her ground. "Get out of here!" she spat, feeling the fury of a whole Clan of queens ready to defend their kits.

In the distance, she could hear the warriors returning, pounding through the trees with calls of alarm. The fox ducked to one side, then turned and fled. Hollyleaf followed, relief making her ears ring. She dived into the undergrowth and kept on running, flattening one ear back for signs of pursuit. But the warriors had stayed with Cherrypaw and Molepaw and didn't come after the fox again. For a moment Hollyleaf wondered how much Cherrypaw and Molepaw had seen from underneath the thicket; would they tell their Clanmates about the strange cat that had chased off the fox? Hollyleaf knew she had taken a big risk, but she had had no choice. She had saved the lives of those kits, and that was all that mattered.



CHAPTER 10

Hollyleaf gave up trying to sleep and hauled herself out of the crumpled feathers. She couldn't remember the last time her eyes had stayed closed all night. When she had drifted off earlier, she dreamed she was back in the hollow, defending her Clanmates from foxes, helping them gather herbs, watching kits play in the sunshine. It only took moments before she jerked awake in the lonely dark, with a sharp pain inside her that memories would never ease.

She padded along the tunnel to the river-cave with a strange feeling of calm. Fallen Leaves was sitting in his usual place beside the water. Hollyleaf settled down next to him and waited until he met her gaze. "I'm sorry," she began. "I will never forget how you saved my life and gave me somewhere to stay when I thought I had lost everything. You have been a true friend, and I will always be grateful for that. But I don't belong here."

"I know," Fallen Leaves meowed. "I always hoped you would stay. I... I never had someone to share my home before. But your Clan needs you more than I do. You must realize that by now."

Hollyleaf nodded, looking down at her paws. "And I need them. But I don't know how to go back! So much has happened!"

"When the time comes, you will know," whispered Fallen Leaves, and when Hollyleaf lifted her head, he had vanished and she was alone by the rippling water.

A moon passed. Hollyleaf was even more restless than usual, creeping into ThunderClan's territory every day before dawn but always shying away from presenting herself in the hollow. She couldn't imagine what she would say, or how the cats would react. On the night of the full moon she climbed the ridge and looked down at the island in

the lake, picturing the four Clans gathered there. Did they even remember her? Suddenly filled with doubt, Hollyleaf went back to the tunnels and curled into her nest, only to dream that she was at a Gathering surrounded by scornful, jeering cats who wanted to know why a loner was asking to join the Clans. Hollyleaf woke with a start, shivering. She was still a warrior, wasn't she?

After that she stayed inside the tunnels for several days, eating fish and patrolling endless stone passages until her paws were as rough as tree bark. Fallen Leaves had told her she would know when it was time for her to go back. She hoped he was right, and that the chance hadn't already passed her by.

She was finishing a late meal of minnow when there were soft paw steps behind her and she turned to see Fallen Leaves entering the river-cave. Hollyleaf hadn't seen him for a while, and she jumped to her paws with excitement. "Hey! Where have you been?"

Fallen Leaves held up his tail to silence her. "There are cats in the tunnels. Something bad is happening." He whipped around and headed into the tunnel that led eventually to the moor. Hollyleaf followed him, running to keep up. They had hardly left the faint light of the river-cave when she heard voices echoing through the darkness. Not ThunderClan cats this time but WindClan—and another voice she recognized, a tom who spoke louder than the others in a deep rumble that sounded like thunder as it rang off the stone. *Sol!* In a flash Hollyleaf remembered the tortoiseshell-and-white cat who had caused such trouble before, predicting the vanishing of the sun and trying to persuade Blackstar to turn his back on his warrior ancestors. *What's he doing back here?*

In front of her, Fallen Leaves stopped. The conversation traveled clearly along the tunnel.

"This is your chance for true glory!" Sol was saying. "Onestar may want peace, but that is a sign of weakness! Attack ThunderClan through the tunnels, and victory will be easy over those mouse-munching idiots!"

"Sol's right!" called another cat; Hollyleaf was sure it was Owlwhisker. "We've listened to Onestar for too long. He should let us fight now, do what we've trained for, and teach those ThunderClan cats that we're stronger than they think!"

There was a chorus of yowls in agreement. Hollyleaf's fur stood on end. Her Clanmates were going to be attacked! She couldn't let this happen! Beside her, Fallen Leaves stiffened. "There are other cats down here," he breathed into Hollyleaf's ear.

Very carefully, she turned and sniffed the air. Two ThunderClan cats were standing in a side tunnel, just around the corner. Hollyleaf inhaled again until she could identify the scents: Ivypool and her sister, Dovewing. She started to pad toward them, then stopped as there was a hiss from the WindClan cats.

"Did anyone hear a noise?" growled a warrior.

Fallen Leaves put his mouth close to Hollyleaf's ear. "You have to get them out of here. Your whole Clan needs you now. If WindClan is going to attack through the tunnels, you are the only one who can help them."

Hollyleaf looked at her friend. "It's time, isn't it?" she meowed softly.

Fallen Leaves nodded. "Go well," he murmured. "I will never forget you, Hollyleaf."

At that moment, there was a cracking noise from the side tunnel, nothing more than a pebble slipping underneath a paw, but echoed and magnified by the stone walls until it sounded as loud as thunder.

"What was that?" Owlwhisker growled. "Is some cat eavesdropping on us?"

Hollyleaf began to creep toward the thicker shadows where her Clanmates were hiding.

"Get us out of here!" she heard Ivypool whisper.

"I followed the voices to get here," Dovewing replied. "I'm not sure of the way out."

Behind her, Hollyleaf heard the WindClan cats stirring. It sounded as if more than one was coming to investigate.

Ivypool had heard them too. "They're coming to look for us! We have to go."

There wasn't time to lead these cats out from the safety of the shadows. Hollyleaf would have to show herself to them, let them know that she was a cat who could be trusted. She took a deep breath. All the moons of hiding, trying to forget she had ever belonged to a Clan, seemed to vanish in a single heartbeat. The blood of a warrior flowed through her veins. Nothing was more important than loyalty to her Clan.

She walked into the side tunnel and felt the air tingle as Dovewing and Ivypool tensed, ready to defend themselves.

"Come with me," she ordered into the darkness. "Quick!"

"No way!" Ivypool hissed. "You could be with them."

"I'm not," Hollyleaf mewed, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Prove it," Dovewing challenged.

"I shouldn't have to," Hollyleaf snapped. *Didn't these cats recognize ThunderClan scent when it was in front of them?* "For StarClan's sake, let's go."

In the faintest gleam of starlight filtering from the river-cave, Hollyleaf saw Ivypool's eyes widen as she exchanged a glance with her sister. "StarClan?" Ivypool echoed. "Then you—"

"Do you want to get out of here or not?" Hollyleaf interrupted.

"Yes, we do," Ivypool snapped back. "But how do we know you won't lead us farther in?"

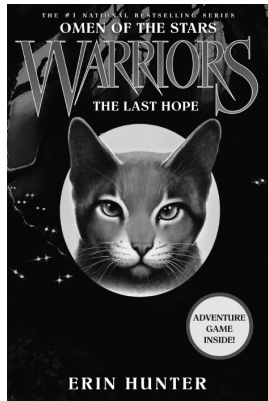
Hollyleaf let out a hiss of frustration. Couldn't these questions have waited? And yet perhaps it wasn't surprising that these young cats had

no idea who she was. She was going to be a stranger to many of her Clanmates after being away for so long.

“Because I’m a ThunderClan cat like you,” she meowed, raising her voice over the pounding of her heart. “My name is Hollyleaf.”

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PROLOGUE

A jagged ridge sliced across the horizon, piercing the black sky with its peaks. Four shapes, their pelts flecked by starlight, crouched on the silvered granite where the highest summit pushed into ice-cold wind.

"We have come." The white she-cat hunched down harder against the chill reaching for her bones. "Just as you asked us to."

Her companion dipped his head to the cats who had been waiting for them. "Greetings, Owl Feather, Broken Shadow."

"Greetings, Slant." Broken Shadow spiked her thick fur, muffling the stone-cold air. Her eyes reflected the rushing stars as she met the white cat's gaze. "It is good to meet you again, Half Moon." As she spoke, two more pelts moved like shadow over the stone.

"Bluestar, Spottedleaf, I'm glad to see you." Half Moon welcomed the StarClan warriors as they settled beside the four Ancients.

Bluestar curled her tail over her paws. "We have come to prepare for the end," she meowed solemnly.

Owl Feather narrowed her yellow eyes. "And to believe what we have to tell you?"

Spottedleaf let out a low growl. "Bluestar has always believed! It is the others we need to convince."

"We're running out of time!" Slant snapped.

The sky spun around them, its stars racing until they blurred into silver streaks—but the mountaintop seemed caught in stillness, like a warrior before the final pounce.

Bluestar's eyes glistened. "The Clans will make their own choices. I can do no more."

Slant leaned closer. "But the prophecies helped, didn't they?"

"Yes." Bluestar glanced at her medicine cat. "Spottedleaf recognized the flaming star that led me to Firestar."

Owl Feather acknowledged Spottedleaf with a blink. "She used her gift well. All along, it has been Firestar's kin who hold the last hope of the Clans in their paws."

"What about the fourth?" Slant leaned forward, anxiety pricking his gaze. "When will they find the fourth cat?"

"The fourth must be found soon," fretted Broken Shadow. "There is so little time left."

Owl Feather's tail twitched. "Are you sure we've done enough?"

"We have done everything we could." Half Moon's amber gaze flicked toward two figures clambering over the rocks toward them. "Midnight, is that you?"

"I come with Rock." The great she-badger lumbered onto the smooth granite. Rock stepped out behind her, his furless body pale in the moonlight.

Broken Shadow shifted her paws. "Greetings, Midnight. I . . . I didn't realize that you knew Rock."

"Since the dawn of your time, we have known each other," Midnight rumbled, turning her wide, striped head. "Since first cat put paw beside water."

Rock sat down on the cold stone. His blind blue eyes were round and white as moons. "We watched the first sunrise over the lake."

"It burst water into flame," Midnight recalled. "And in fiery reflection we see future of all cats: Tribe of Rushing Water, five Clan, four Clan, forest, and lake."

"We saw your whole journey, from lake to forest and back." Rock tipped his head as if watching the cats process in front of him. "The prophecies all came from that first reflected sunrise—the cat with a pelt of flame that would save the Clans, the silver cat who would save the Tribe of Rushing Water, and finally the four who would carry the last hope, not just of the Clans, but of light itself."

Midnight's claws scratched the granite. "Now we fear we see a final sunset that ends your story."

Half Moon stepped forward. "But the four? They will save us, surely?"

"They came as we saw they would and, when they came, they lit the darkest fires." Midnight gazed at the Ancient cats, her beady black eyes intent. "So you and all long-dead cats burn like stars once more."

"But evil is coming," Rock warned.

Midnight cut in. "Darkness we saw born like littermate alongside the light. Now all must stand and fight."

As the other cats shivered, Rock moved his blind gaze over them. "Thank you for safeguarding the prophecies for so long, and for passing them down from cats forgotten now and vanished."

Broken Shadow sighed. "So many lives lost."

"All lives are brief," Rock reminded her.

"My son's was too brief!" Her eyes flashed accusingly. "Why

couldn't you save Fallen Leaves?"

"It was never my duty to save anyone!" Rock flashed back at her. "What is the point of a life held in the paws of another? There must be choice. There must be freedom. I can point the way but every cat walks on its own paws."

Slant narrowed his eyes. "Do the Clans walk alone into the final battle?"

Half Moon flattened her ears. "Never alone!" She lifted her chin. "I will fight alongside Jayfeather."

Broken Shadow unsheathed her claws. "And I will fight alongside my son."

"I will fight beside Jagged Lightning and my kits to defeat this darkness." Owl Feather's eyes sparked.

Bluestar thrashed her tail. "And I will die a tenth time to defend ThunderClan!"

"These cats will never stand alone," Half Moon declared. "We are with them just as we have always been."

"Light against dark," Midnight growled. "This is the end of all things—this is the last sunrise."

Rock touched her flank lightly with the tip of his tail. "It is what we have been waiting for, my friend."



CHAPTER 1

Someone's bleeding!

Ivypool stiffened as the memory of Antpelt's death flooded her mind, just as it always did when the scent of blood hit her. She could still feel his flesh tearing beneath her claws, still see his final agonized spasm before he stopped moving forever. She'd been forced to kill the WindClan warrior to convince Tigerstar of her loyalty. It had earned her the grim honor of training Dark Forest warriors, but she knew she would never wash the scent of his blood from her paws.

"Stop!" she yowled.

Birchfall froze mid-lunge and stared at her. "What's wrong?"

"I smell blood," she snapped. "We're only training. I don't want any injuries."

Birchfall blinked at her, puzzled.

Redwillow scrambled up from underneath Birchfall's paws. "It's just a nick," the ShadowClan warrior meowed. He showed Ivypool his ear. Blood welled from a thin scratch at the tip.

"Just be careful," Ivypool cautioned.

"*Be careful?*" Hawkfrost's snarl made her spin around. "There's a war coming and it won't be won with sheathed claws." Hawkfrost curled his lip and stared at Ivypool. "I thought you were helping to train our recruits to fight like real warriors, not soft Clan cats."

Birchfall bristled. "Clan cats aren't soft!"

"Then why do you come here?" Hawkfrost challenged.

Redwillow whisked his tail. "Our Clans need us to be the best warriors we can be. You told us that, remember?"

Hawkfrost nodded slowly. "And you can only learn the skills you need *here*." He flicked his nose toward Birchfall. "Attack Redwillow again," he ordered. "This time don't stop at the first scent of blood." He

narrowed his eyes at Ivypool.

Ivypool swallowed, terrified she'd given herself away. No Dark Forest cat could ever know that she came here to spy for Dovewing, Jayfeather, and Lionblaze. Growling, she lifted her chin and barged past Birchfall. "Do it like this," she told him. With a hiss she hurled herself at Redwillow, ducking away from his claws, and grasped his forepaw between her jaws. Using his weight to unbalance him, she snapped her head around and twisted him deftly onto his back. He landed with a thump, which she knew sounded more painful than it felt. She'd hardly pierced his fur with her teeth and her jerk was so well-timed it had knocked him off his feet without wrenching his leg.

She glanced back at Hawkfrost, relieved to see approval glinting in his eyes. He'd only seen the flash of fur and claw and heard the smack of muscle against the slippery earth.

"Hawkfrost!"

Birchfall and Redwillow stared wide-eyed as Applefur appeared from the mist. The ShadowClan she-cat's eyes were bright, her mottled brown pelt pulsing with heat from training. "Blossomfall and Hollowflight want to fight *Dark Forest* warriors."

Applefur's apprentices padded out of the shadows. "We can fight Clan cats anytime," Blossomfall complained.

Hollowflight nodded. "We come here to learn skills we can't learn anywhere else." The RiverClan tom's pelt was matted with blood. Clumps of fur stuck out along his spine.

Haven't you had enough? Ivypool glanced at Hawkfrost. "Are there any Dark Forest warriors close by?" she ventured, praying there weren't.

"Of course." Hawkfrost tasted the air.

The screech of fighting cats echoed through the mist. It had become like birdsong to Ivypool—filling the forest, so familiar that she only heard it when she listened for it. "Why aren't we training with them tonight?" she asked. Most nights, the Dark Forest warriors couldn't wait to share their cruel skills with the Clan cats.

Hawkfrost wove between Blossomfall and Applefur. "I want you to learn how other Clans fight."

Ivypool shivered.

"You may be fighting side by side one day," Hawkfrost went on.

Liar!

"You need to know your allies' moves so you can match them, claw for claw."

No, you're training them to destroy one another in the final battle.

A husky growl echoed from the trees. "Four Clans will unite as one when it matters most." Tigerstar padded from the shadows, his wide tabby head held high. "This is the law of the Dark Forest. Remember it."

Birchfall nodded solemnly. "Four Clans will unite as one when it

matters most," he echoed.

"When will that be?" Blossomfall's eyes were round.

"You'll know when the time comes." Mapleshade slunk from the trees. Her tortoiseshell pelt was so transparent now that the white patches showed the forest behind. Ivypool flinched at the reminder that she too would fade from every memory one day.

"Tigerstar?" Blossomfall was staring at the dark warrior. "Are we training for something special?"

Ivypool flinched. "Not yet," she meowed quickly, one eye on Tigerstar. He nodded and she went on. "But you never know." She remembered the vicious battle with WindClan in the tunnels only a quarter moon earlier. "There may be more cats like Sol ready to lead one Clan against another."

Applefur stepped forward. "Next time a rogue tries to drive us apart, I'll stand beside ThunderClan, not against them!"

Ivypool shifted her paws. *These cats believe their loyalty to the Clans is being strengthened.* She glanced at Birchfall. *But who will they be loyal to when the final battle comes? Their Clanmates or the Dark Forest warriors?*

Tigerstar flicked his tail. "Go back to your nests," he ordered the Clan cats.

Hollowflight tipped his head. "But it's early."

"The senior warriors have a meeting." Tigerstar nodded to Mapleshade and Hawkfrost.

"Can I come?" Ivypool asked.

Mapleshade narrowed her eyes. "No."

"I'm a mentor now," Ivypool pressed. She had to find out when the Dark Forest cats were planning to attack the Clans by the lake.

"While you still have the taste of living prey on your tongue, you're not truly one of us," Mapleshade snarled.

Tigerstar nodded. "Go back to your Clan and rest," he ordered. "You'll need your strength tomorrow night." He turned and stalked into the shadows, Mapleshade hurrying after.

Blossomfall shrugged. "I guess we can practice our new moves in the forest as well as here," she told Birchfall. Closing her eyes, she began to fade.

Ivypool watched her Clanmate vanish from the forest. *She'll take her wounds with her. And the memory of what she's learned.* Ivypool's pelt pricked. She didn't want those memories, these vicious skills in ThunderClan!

"Are you coming?" Birchfall flicked his tail.

Ivypool twitched her ears to send him on his way. "I'll be right behind you."

Hollowflight, Applefur, and Redwillow were melting into the shadows as Birchfall disappeared. As soon as they had gone, Ivypool turned to Hawkfrost. "You trust me to train cats for the Dark Forest, but

not to attend gatherings of the senior warriors?"

His eyes gleamed. "Do you really want to be there?"

Ivypool nodded.

Hawkfrost leaned closer. "Tough." He turned and padded after Tigerstar.

Ivypool flexed her claws. *I'm coming whether you want me to or not!* As Hawkfrost's pelt shimmered away between the trees, she darted forward and, heart racing, began to shadow him. Keeping just enough mist and bramble between them so that he was little more than a flicker at the edge of her vision, she matched his pawsteps.

"Snowtuft?" Hawkfrost suddenly slowed.

Ivypool halted and pricked her ears.

Hawkfrost greeted his Clanmate with a growl. "Are you heading for the meeting?"

"I wouldn't miss it for all the mice in the forest," Snowtuft rasped. "Where are the Clan cats?"

Hawkfrost snorted. "Tigerstar sent them back to their nests."

Snowtuft's claws scraped the earth. "Are you sure there won't be any hanging around the training rock?"

"Brokenstar will make sure there aren't," Hawkfrost growled.

The training rock! Ivypool flicked her tail. *They're meeting beside the river!* She knew the Dark Forest well enough now to find her way without being spotted by Hawkfrost. She only had to follow the old stream to the hollow trunks, then aim for the riverbank.

Crouching, she slunk behind bushes until she could hear the deep murmur of the senior warriors. She slid behind a trunk and peered around. The mist cleared where the river cut through the trees. A large boulder stuck out of the mud on the shore. Ivypool flattened her ears. She had shared her first training sessions with her Dark Forest Clanmates here. Now it was circled by heavily muscled warriors. Feeling the stirrings of fear in her belly, she pushed them away. *I am a warrior of the Dark Forest*, she reminded herself. *I am the equal of any of these cats!*

Brokenstar stood on the stone, his thick, dark pelt spiked with excitement. "The time is close," he growled.

Mapleshade lifted her fading white muzzle. "Good," she hissed. "I'd hate to miss it."

Hawkfrost sat and watched through narrowed eyes. Blue as ice, they followed Brokenstar's every move. Shredtail and Thistleclaw paced while Tigerstar stood stiff-legged, his tail lashing. "Where will we strike first?" he demanded.

Brokenstar slid from the boulder and scratched a line in the muddy earth. "This is where the lake meets the land."

Slash.

Slash.

Slash.

With deft claws he sliced more shapes into the ground. "We will come at them from here and here." He stabbed the ground. "And while they are fighting there, another patrol will strike here."

Ivypool stretched forward, desperate to see where he was pointing at, but Tigerstar and Shredtail blocked her view as they crowded close. Her heart pounding in her throat, Ivypool listened for clues instead.

"They'll be weaker where the hill slopes down to the brook," Brokenstar growled. "We can come at them from higher ground and drive them backward."

"What if we approach from here instead?" Tigerstar jabbed the map with a claw.

Ivypool jumped as Brokenstar's eyes lit up with interest. "At the very heart of the Clan!"

"Once the kits are dead, their mothers will have less to fight for," Mapleshade pointed out.

"You're right." Brokenstar sat back on his haunches. "It's decided, then."

Hawkfrost looked over his shoulder, his gaze grazing the tree where Ivypool was hiding. She flattened herself to the ground, relief swamping her as Hawkfrost's gaze swept past, missing her, and the Dark Forest warriors began to pad away from the river. As soon as the shore was deserted, she slid out from her hiding place and crept toward Brokenstar's map. Tense as a rabbit, she glimpsed lines scored in the mud.

Suddenly, paws shook her violently. She jerked around, hissing, and lashed out at her attacker.

"Ivypool!"

Dovewing's shocked mew brought her to her senses. Ivypool was in her nest. "You woke me up!" she snarled at her sister.

Dovewing stared at her, terror glittering in her eyes. "Ivypool? Are you okay?"

"I was dreaming!" Frustration tightened Ivypool's throat. She was about to see Brokenstar's plans!

"You're awake now, though?" Dovewing asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Ivypool muttered. "I'm awake."

Dovewing met her gaze. "You never would have tried to shred me for waking you up before."

"You know what happens when I dream."

"That's why I woke you. Your fur was on end. I was scared something was . . ." Dovewing suddenly narrowed her eyes. "Did you want to *stay* in the Dark Forest?"

Ivypool lifted her chin. Here, in the safety of her nest, the terror that had sharpened her dreams ebbed away. But the sense of danger still thrilled beneath her pelt. "I was doing something important!"

Dovewing leaned closer. "What?"

Ivypool turned away. "It's too late now." Brokenstar's plans would

be scuffed or washed away by tonight.

Dovewing suddenly wrinkled her nose. "You smell foul."

Ivypool glanced down at her muddy paws and tucked them tighter beneath her. "Don't worry. I'll wash."

"Good." Dovewing squeezed past her and headed out of the den.

Ivypool glanced at Molepaw's empty nest and Cherrypaw's beside it. They'd already left for apprentice duties. Flexing her claws, she shouldered her way out of the den.

"Ivypool!" Bumblestripe called from the fresh-kill pile. The well-muscled gray tom had a fat blackbird at his paws.

Ivypool ignored him and ducked through the thorn tunnel, into the forest. How could she stay in camp, confined by the hollow, trapped with her Clanmates while her head still spun with the scents and sounds of the Dark Forest?

She bounded up the slope toward the ridge. Strength surged through her body. The Dark Forest had given her that power. It had trained her to be a more skillful warrior than her Clanmates, given her tactics that she would use against the Dark Forest cats when the final battle came. Ivypool's claws sliced through brambles as she crested the slope and burst from the tree line. Below, the lake glittered beneath a pale dawn sky. Leaf-fall was beginning to tinge the treetops. The green haze that had enfolded the forests for moons was darkening to amber. Excitement surged beneath Ivypool's pelt. There was no prey she couldn't catch; no warrior she couldn't defeat. Her paws itched to prove it.

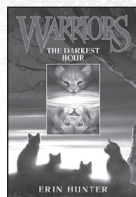
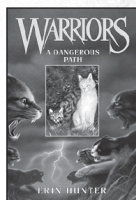
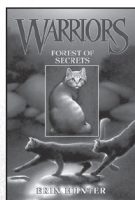
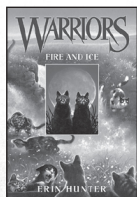
Out of nowhere, a vision filled her eyes. Warriors swarmed from the shores and spilled into the forest. Torn-eared and scarred, their eyes gleamed with hate. Ferns trembled, brambles shivered as the woods seemed to heave, suddenly alive with battle-hungry cats. Shrieks echoed and Ivypool heard the thud of muscle against rock as the world shook in the claws of the Dark Forest warriors.

As the vision faded she could still taste the tang of blood and fear. Ivypool realized that she was shaking, and her pads were sweating. All the battle skills in the Place of No Stars would not be enough to stop that unrelenting tide of death.

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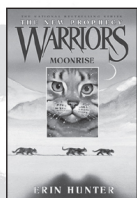
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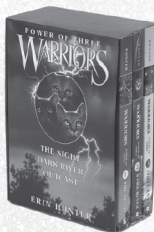
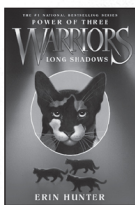
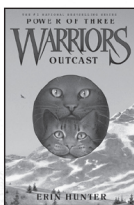
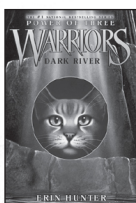
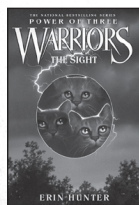
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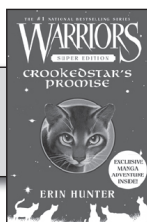
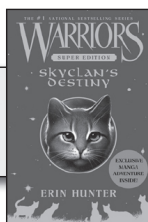
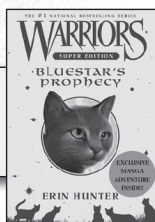
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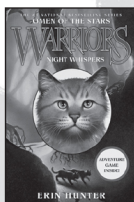
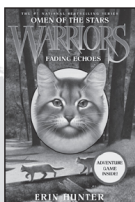
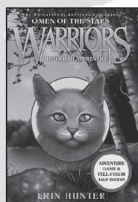


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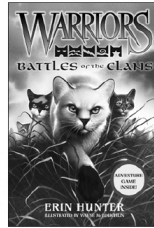
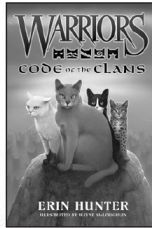
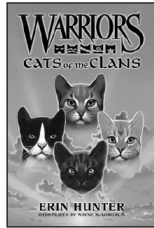
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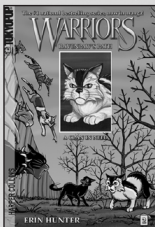
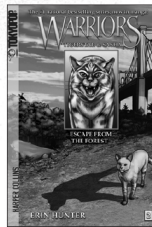
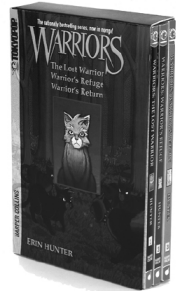
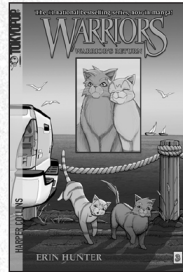
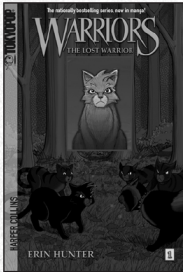
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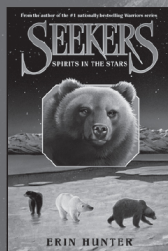
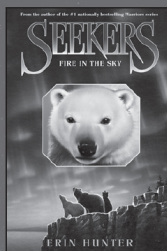
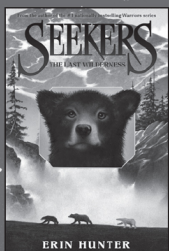
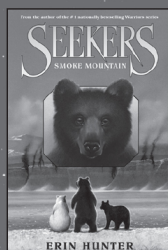
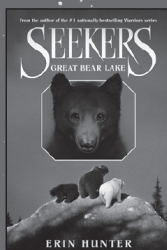
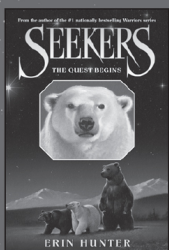
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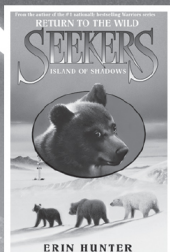
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About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich, mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Seekers series.

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